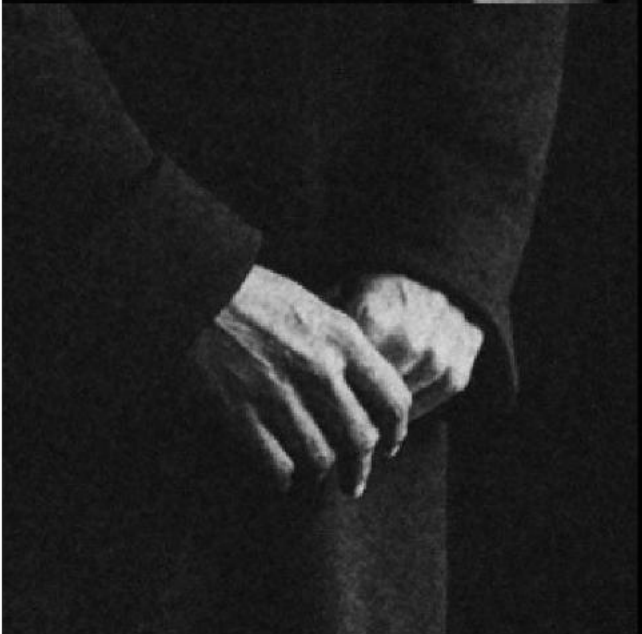


Earning His Forgiveness

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The Half Blood Prince*



Chapter 1

It was 10:33 a.m. on a Tuesday, and James Potter was staring at Snape again. He didn't mean to, but ever since he'd turned him upside down to reveal his tattered underwear to the student body, James couldn't seem to stop staring. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was feeling *guilty*. But that didn't make sense. He'd never felt guilty about pranking Snape before. Surely this wasn't worse than anything else he and the other Marauders had done in the past.

Despite this reassurance, it was impossible to deny that Snape looked a little...well, broken. On top of being his usual greasy-haired, sallow-skinned self, he looked twitchy and underfed. James noticed Snape rarely came to the Great Hall anymore. When he did, he mostly pushed food around on his plate, sitting alone as usual and not looking up or talking to anyone. When a professor called on him—because professors were the only ones who seemed to speak his name at all—he flinched and grew even paler than before.

The strange part was, James usually would have been happy about these things. Breaking Snape had been his primary goal since first year—that and securing a date with Lily Evans. It was the ultimate victory. Or at least, he'd thought it would be. Now he had done it, and instead of feeling triumphant, he just felt nauseated.

After the prank, Snape stood outside the Gryffindor tower every night for the rest of fifth year, miserable and avoiding eye contact, waiting for Lily so he could apologize for calling her a mudblood. She walked past him every time, a fire in her eyes and her chin in the air. Now they were well into their sixth year, and it seemed Snape had given up. Which, again, James should have been thrilled about. He no longer had any competition for Lily.

But then, perhaps Lily's coldness toward him was the cause of his nausea. It was certainly a more palatable explanation. Even though she and Snape were no longer friends, she seemed to hold a grudge against James for hurting the slimy git. James didn't understand this. She should have been swooning as he defended her honor, shouldn't she? James might have bullied Snape, but at least he wasn't a blood supremacist or a Death-Eater-to-be.

Whatever the reason, James had felt ill ever since, and he couldn't stop staring at Severus Snape. The Marauders still picked on him, but it no longer brought James any joy. In all honesty, nothing brought James much joy at the moment, and he couldn't help feeling like it all stemmed back to that prank.

Currently, Snape was sitting in Potions with Professor Slughorn, one row up and to the left of James. His hair was greasier than usual, and he was hunched over his potions textbook so closely his nose could smudge the ink with oil from his skin. He looked so small, and his bony fingers turned white from clenching the pages. James' chest constricted at the sight. *Great*, he thought bitterly. *Another symptom to go along with the nausea.*

Remus elbowed him. "You're staring again."

James flushed, looking at his friend in apology. James and Sirius always split up between the other two Marauders during Potions since Moony and Wormtail were pants at the subject. It seemed James had neglected his duties once again. "Sorry. Where were we?"

Remus eyed him cautiously as if considering his words with care. “You know, Lily would likely be more open to your...flirtation if you mended things with Snape.”

James stared at his friend in surprise, gratitude welling up inside him. Leave it to Remus to both notice his dilemma and give him the perfect excu—*reason*—to fix it. “Moony, you’re a genius.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “I’m perfectly aware. You can thank me by keeping me from blowing up another cauldron.”

James grinned and turned his focus to the potion they’d be making that day. He only chanced another glance at Snape after he set the cauldron to a low boil for ten minutes. As he watched the Slytherin tuck his hair behind his ear and check the color of his potion, James felt a smile tug at his lips. He had a plan, and the nausea wasn’t so prominent anymore.

Sitting in the Great Hall for dinner, James did his best to keep his attention on the conversation at hand. Sirius was describing his new prank idea for the day before Christmas break while Peter listened avidly. Remus pretended not to hear, as if he wasn’t the mastermind behind all of their best ideas.

“...Peter told me about this Muggle game where one person is ‘it’ and when they tag another person, that person is ‘stuck’ to them, and they’re both ‘it’ together. We could do something similar, but instead of people holding hands, we come up with a spell that will magically stick people together wherever they touch.”

Peter’s eyes widened. “That’s brilliant.”

“Would we charm everyone or just a few people and make it spread to anyone they touched?” James asked. His mind was already whirring with possibilities.

Sirius considered it. “We could pick one person from each House.” He snickered. “Better not pick Snivellus though, because no one would ever touch him.”

The nausea returned, but James covered it up with a laugh. His eyes unconsciously found Snape across the Great Hall. The boy was present but not eating. James wondered how to convince the Slytherin to break the unhealthy habit. Maybe he could ask the house-elves to look after him and bring him food to his dormitory when he didn’t eat enough. Or perhaps he could speak to Madam Pomfrey about a meal replacement potion.

Peter furrowed his brows. “After the first few people got stuck, wouldn’t everyone else just avoid them?”

Remus’ lips twitched with muted amusement. “Not if the spell only ends when everyone at Hogwarts is stuck together.”

Identical mischievous grins broke out on the Marauders’ faces. “Moony, you’re a genius,” they said in unison.

“So I keep hearing.” He returned to his food, pretending he hadn’t just neglected his Prefect badge entirely.

“We’ll head to the library tonight to start researching spells,” Sirius said.

James, however, had just spotted Snape leaving the Great Hall. “Can’t do tonight, Padfoot,” he

blurted, standing and gathering his things. "I've got a paper due tomorrow."

Sirius frowned. "Really? Which class?"

James caught Remus' gaze.

"Arithmancy," the werewolf lied, naming the one class he and James had without the other Marauders. "I told him to do it last week, but you lot would rather do everything the night before."

James grinned, hoping Remus could see the thanks in his eyes. "What can I say, Moony? I like to live on the edge."

"I just like to piss off Moony," Sirius said.

James left the table before he caught Remus' response, but he knew Sirius would be doing his own homework for the rest of the week instead of copying off of Remus.

As James slipped out of the Great Hall, he caught sight of a head of black hair ducking around the corner. He followed at a distance, wishing he'd brought his invisibility cloak. Which was unnecessary, he reminded himself, since he wasn't doing anything wrong. Just something that felt wrong—because he had never once in his entire life tried to be nice to Snape. And now he was going behind Sirius' back to do it, for reasons he couldn't explain to himself. He'd have to ask Moony what was wrong with him later. James might not understand his sudden need to apologize to Snape, but Remus clearly had an idea. Moony never volunteered tips to help him woo Evans. He claimed Lily deserved better than James, or something like that, but James didn't understand. Who could be better than him?

Snape looked from side to side as he walked, as if waiting for someone to pounce on him. When the Slytherin spun around to search behind him, James ducked into an alcove. His heart thudded in his chest. After a few seconds, he deemed it safe to emerge—just in time to see the tail end of a black cloak flutter into the library. James paused, giving Snape a chance to settle in now that he knew his final destination. If James showed up too soon, the other boy would spot him and leave, and James would be forced to resort to stalking—which, while fun, was a better start to a prank than an apology. Then again, James was pretty sure this already qualified as stalking.

After several minutes had gone by, James entered the library. His gaze drifted around the tables, but he didn't see Snape. Considering how suspicious the boy was, he had probably tucked himself deep in the stacks where others wouldn't find him. James took off into the library, moving as silently as he could so as not to scare Snape off before he could talk to him.

When Snape came into view, James smiled, trying to seem as non-threatening as possible. "Hello, Snape. Mind if I sit here?"

The Slytherin didn't look up, gripping his book tighter in his hands. "Yes."

James sat across from him anyway. "What are you reading?" Snape scowled behind his curtain of hair but said nothing. James ducked his head so he could read the cover. "Potions, huh? That's some advanced stuff." Still no response. "You know, I read the other day that—"

"Potter, if you're planning on hexing me, get on with it. I have more important things to do with my time."

James pressed a hand against his heart. "Hex you? Dearest Snivellus, I was merely making friendly conversation."

“‘Friendly’ implies we’re friends.” Snape looked up finally, black eyes meeting James’ in a glare that sent shivers down his spine. “We aren’t. Your friends Black and Pettigrew, however, are no doubt waiting in the stacks, so you can tell them to come out already.”

James scowled. This wasn’t going well at all. Sure, he didn’t have a plan, but he didn’t think he’d need one. He figured the minute Snape saw him speaking cordially and not jinxing him, he’d instantly forgive all of James’ past torments. Okay, so maybe he didn’t really think that would happen. But he had hoped it might.

“Peter and Sirius are still at dinner.”

“The werewolf then,” Snape said, once again looking at his book. James noticed the way he grew smaller, no doubt remembering the night Moony had almost killed him. The night they had almost *let* Moony kill him.

“Him too.”

Snape curled in on himself even more. “Why aren’t you with them? Trouble in paradise?”

James sighed. “I...” This had been a lot easier in his head. “I wanted to apologize.”

Snape’s lip curved into a sneer. “Touching, Potter.”

“I’ve been an arse, and I know there’s no way to undo what I’ve done to you, but I’m ready to fix whatever I can.”

“Skip to the punchline,” Snape drawled, turning the page of his book.

“This isn’t a prank,” James exclaimed. He tugged at his hair in frustration.

“How refreshing, seeing as every interaction before this has been.”

James groaned. “You’re infuriating.”

“Likewise.”

James stood, shaking his finger at the Slytherin. “I will make things better between us, just you wait.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Yes. No. Argh!” And with that, James stormed out, vowing to be better prepared next time.

As he made his way back to Gryffindor, James realized his skin was flushed and his heart was beating fast in his chest. He felt alive for the first time in a long while. Perhaps he hadn’t yet made amends with Severus Snape, but he was certainly feeling better about the whole ordeal. In fact, winning Snape’s forgiveness might turn out to be his favorite game yet—even better than trying to win a date with Evans. The Slytherin presented a challenge unlike any James had faced before, and suddenly, all he wanted to do was win it.

Struck by inspiration, James decided against returning to the common room and made his way instead to the Room of Requirement. He walked back and forth in front of the Barnabas the Barmy tapestry until a door materialized on the opposite wall. When he opened it, his eyes lit. It was a long room containing nothing but a fireplace and a chalkboard—perfect for pacing and recording ideas.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. After an evening in here, Snape's forgiveness couldn't remain out of his grasp for long.

Chapter 2

The next day, James Potter set out with a plan. He realized he'd made a mistake the day before in trying to be earnest. Snape had never seen his serious side (and he'd had some pretty terrible run-ins with his Sirius side), so of course he believed it to be a prank. If James tried that again, Snape would be on edge the entire time, waiting for the prank to occur. Instead, James would have to be his most obnoxious and annoying self, so that Snape would believe sheer irritation to be his goal. Snape would slowly grow used to this new form of "pranking" until he lost his suspicious streak and opened up enough to accept James' apology.

It was brilliant, really, and James wished he could share it with the other Marauders. He was certain they'd be impressed with his tactic, but he knew they'd be too disgusted by his end goal to appreciate the plot. He supposed, just this once, he would have to keep his tricks to himself. The thought didn't bother him as much as he thought it would.

He stopped in the Great Hall at lunch to see if Snape was there, ignoring the beckoning of his friends. When there was no sign of the Slytherin, James jogged off to the kitchens and asked the house-elves to make a meal for two. They happily complied, nodding along with interest as he explained his intentions. They even threw in a bottle of deep green liquid which they explained was a vitamin potion to help with Snape's sallow skin and limp hair. James thanked them with barely contained amusement and shrunk the basket of food so it fit in his pocket before making his way to the library.

Snape was in the same spot as before, and James seated himself across from him, placing the basket on the table and zapping it back to size. Madam Pince wouldn't check on them this far into the library, so James figured he could get away with it.

"Hello, Snape. I brought you lunch." James gave him a dazzling smile. The Slytherin didn't look up. Well, that wouldn't do. James pulled out a sandwich and thrust it into the smaller boy's face. "Here."

"Like I'd eat anything that came from you, Potter."

"I didn't make it. The house-elves did. Although I'm perfectly capable of making a sandwich, just so you know." James pushed it forward until the sandwich touched Snape's lips.

Snape made a face and pushed it away. "You're also perfectly capable of poisoning one."

"That was *one time*," James objected. "Just take a bite."

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

“What if I take a bite first?”

“And risk getting infected with whatever vile germs you have in your mouth?”

“I’ll cut it in half then. That way you can see if I drop dead, and you won’t catch my good looks and charm.”

The Slytherin scowled. “I’m not eating that sandwich.”

James tore it in two and placed one on a plate next to Snape before taking a bite. When the boy glared up at him, James said, “In case you change your mind.”

Snape used the spine of his book to push the plate further away from him before focusing on the pages once more. James chewed his sandwich as noisily as he could, studying the tension in Snape’s shoulders. It could have been his imagination, but they seemed to grow marginally tighter with each chomping sound. James suppressed a smile when the Slytherin’s eye started to twitch.

“Are you going to sit there all day?”

“Only if you do.”

“So you’re following me then.”

“You could say that.”

Snape clenched his jaw, reluctantly dragging his eyes from his book to look at James. “Why?”

“I told you. I want to start over.” He smiled brightly. “Hence, we’re having lunch together.”

“No, we’re not. You’re eating like an animal while I’m trying to read.”

“You don’t have to try so hard, Snivellus. I’d be happy to teach you to read as soon as you finish your sandwich.”

Snape growled, and the sound made James’ pulse race. “Why are you so insistent that I eat that foul sandwich?”

“It’s actually quite delicious,” James replied, taking another bite.

“Why?” Snape repeated.

“I’m not sure exactly. Something to do with the proper ratio of bread to tomato to—”

“Not that, you imbecile. Why do you care if I eat it?”

“Because you’ve been skipping meals all year, and now that we’re no longer enemies, I’m making sure you’re well-fed.”

“We’re still enemies, Potter.”

“Nonsense. Enemies don’t have lunch together.”

Snape looked like he was about to curse him. James just smiled. “If I eat the sandwich,” Snape ground out, “will you go away?”

“Maybe.”

Snape growled again, eyeing the plate with distaste. He set down his book, spine up to save the page, and held the sandwich the way Peter held James' dirty socks when he found them about their room. Looking at James once more as if to make sure he hadn't keeled over from poison in the last three seconds, Snape took a small bite. James watched as he chewed and swallowed. He'd seen Snape eating from across the Great Hall many times, but it was more fascinating up close—seeing the way his jaw worked as he chewed and his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. James grinned, victorious when Snape took another bite. Snape looked uncomfortable under James' steady gaze, so the Gryffindor pulled out his Transfiguration homework. He caught Snape watching him now and then, and it took everything in him not to look up and meet his eyes.

The moment Snape finished the sandwich, he started gathering his things. "Happy?"

"Elated." James hurried to pack up the basket and shove his homework into his bag. "Where are we headed?"

"We are not headed anywhere. *I'm* going to class."

"Great! I'll walk you."

Snape looked like he wanted to object, but instead, he just sighed. As they walked to the Charms classroom together, James was secretly glad the halls were empty. Most students were still at lunch, so James didn't have to deal with the blow to his reputation his newfound project would bring just yet. He was sure he'd figure out a way to explain his behavior at some point, and the other Marauders would back him up with whatever excuse he gave, but at the moment, it was nice to have this just be between him and Snape.

"So did you read anything interesting in that Potions book after I left last night?"

"Potter, how long is this going to last?"

"Undecided."

"And what exactly are you hoping to achieve?"

"A new start, Snape, we've been over this."

"James Potter will be furious when he finds out you used Polyjuice to imitate him," Snape muttered under his breath.

"Hey, you made a joke," James said cheerfully. "Just picture me as your knight in shining armor."

"In case you've been hexed in the head and have forgotten, I'm not a bloody damsel."

"But you're so frequently in distress!"

"Because of you and your friends, you twat," the Slytherin snapped. James tried not to wince as nausea filled him again. *No genuine remorse*, he reminded himself. *Only over-the-top chivalry and annoying banter.*

"That's not the way to properly thank me for my service."

"Oh, pardon me. How about 'fuck you'. Is that better?"

James laughed out loud. He hadn't realized Snape had such a great sense of humor. "Not even nearly," he replied. "However, I think a kiss will suffice." The smile slipped from James' face

when he realized what he'd said. His heart thudded in his chest as he waited for Snape to respond. What if the slimy git actually kissed him? Or what if he thought James was coming onto him?

"Not on your life, Potter," Snape answered smoothly.

James exhaled in relief, uncertain what had come over him. Of course Snape wouldn't kiss him. And what did it matter if Snape thought James was coming onto him? He wasn't, and it wasn't like anyone would believe a Slytherin over James Potter. "I suppose I'll just have to take care of you out of the goodness of my heart," James said sweetly.

"I don't need you to take care of me, Potter."

"That's funny since earlier you couldn't even be bothered to eat without my nagging."

Snape whirled on him. "So you admit that you're nagging."

James smiled, shrugging easily. "What can I say? You bring out my mother in me."

Snape stormed off again, looking incredibly peeved to find James still following him. "Do your friends know you're here?"

"Merlin, no. They hate you, in case you hadn't noticed."

Snape gritted his teeth. "So do you. And I assure you, the feeling is mutual."

"Well, then. I guess I'll have to try harder to get that fresh start, now won't I?"

"Potter, don't you dare--"

"I'll meet you for dinner."

"You won't even know where I am."

James smirked mischievously. "That sounds like a challenge. So if I manage to find you, you'll eat dinner with me?"

"That's not what I said."

"It was implied."

"No, it bloody wasn't--"

"See you tonight!"

"Potter!"

But James had already disappeared, leaving Snape outside the Charms classroom alone. That had gone even better than expected, and James was confident in his ability to make this plan work. Snape could only stay angry with him for so long. He'd tire of his defensiveness and sarcasm after a while, and then he'd have to give in and forgive him. Then maybe the nausea would disappear and James would no longer feel so damn guilty every time the boy flinched or broke eye contact or curled in on himself.

With his inevitable success in mind, James nearly skipped into Defense Against the Dark Arts. He dropped his bag on the floor next to Sirius and took a seat.

“Hey, Prongs. Where’d you run off to at lunch?”

James considered telling the truth but settled for a half-truth. “We haven’t pranked Snivellus in far too long, but I don’t want to get detention before we pull our big Christmas prank, so I’ve taken to following him around and annoying him.”

Sirius snickered. “Did you hex him?”

James felt the nausea roar in his stomach again, and he glanced at Remus. “Nah, the trick is to keep him expecting a hex but then not hexing him. I’ve never seen him more on edge.”

Sirius grinned. “Nice thinking.”

Remus passed him a note as class started up, and James unfolded it under his desk.

I’m baffled by the notion that your reputation can’t withstand an act of basic human decency, it read.

James glared at the werewolf, but Remus just lifted a brow. He knew it was silly to try so hard to appear like a bully while he was attempting to make amends, but something about whatever he was doing with Snape felt private, and he didn’t want to worry about how Sirius would react to it. At least not until he was further along in his plan. It was one thing to tell his friends he was attempting to earn Snape’s forgiveness and then fail. It was quite another to brag about it after he’d received his prize.

A part of him wondered when he started viewing Snape’s good graces as a prize, but the rest of him was too caught up in the game to care. Not only was he making better progress than he expected, but he was also having fun—something he never thought he’d say about spending time with Snape. He couldn’t explain it. There was just something about interacting with his strange (ex-?) rival that made him jittery and excited. He supposed it was the challenge of it all, but somehow that didn’t seem quite right.

It didn’t matter, in the end. So what if he was enjoying his banter with Snape? That just meant this whole ordeal would be less tedious than he’d expected. So what if there was a part of him that was starting to care what the Slytherin thought of him? That was just his guilt showing its head, begging for forgiveness that only Snape could give. It was all perfectly logical, he was sure. Or it would be, as soon as he took some time to puzzle it all out. Right now, however, he had his favorite subject to pay attention to and his best friends in the world at his side. Any thoughts about Severus Snape could wait until tonight. Or at least until his next class.

Chapter 3

After stopping off at the kitchens again, James pulled out the Marauder's Map and searched it carefully. A smile tugged at his lips when he spotted the name *Severus Snape* in an unused classroom deep in the dungeons. It looked like Snape was trying to give him a challenge--as if maybe he wanted to play this game too. And it would have been a challenge, had James been anyone other than a Marauder. As it were, James double-checked the Map, pulled out his invisibility cloak, and started his trek to the dungeons.

Remus had covered for him again when Sirius and Peter asked where he was going, but the look on the werewolf's face said they would be having words sooner or later. James was both dreading and looking forward to it. Dreading because Remus wouldn't spare his delicate masculinity for much longer. Looking forward because it would be fantastic to have someone else deal with the mess in his head for a while, if only to give his own mind a break.

As he grew near the dungeons, excitement bubbled up inside him. He wondered if Snape would be doing homework when he got there or if he'd be tucked behind a desk, hiding in earnest. James checked the map one last time before opening the door. When he did, he spotted Snape hunched over in a corner.

"Aha!" he said dramatically. "I have found you, and as such, you will dine with me."

"Go away," Snape said, hiding a snuffle. It was only then that James realized he was crying. Which meant Snape wasn't playing the game--he was deep in the dungeons because he wanted to be alone. The excitement quickly sapped away until James was left with a vague sense of discomfort. What was he supposed to do with a crying Snape? Usually, he was the one responsible, so the natural response would be to laugh, or high five Sirius, but James was fairly certain he'd done nothing to warrant tears recently. And laughing at him would be a major setback in the game.

Without allowing himself to think about it too hard, James whipped the invisibility cloak from his shoulders and set the basket on a nearby desk before dropping to Snape's side. The boy flinched away from him. James thought this was unwarranted. After all, *he* wasn't the one with robes so old they were probably hand-me-downs from dead people. *He* wasn't the one with hair wasn't so covered in oil it could fuel one of those motorbikes Sirius loved. If anyone should be flinching away it was James. Swallowing down the urge to do just that, James settled an arm around Snape's shoulders and made soft shhing noises. When Snape tensed, he drew him in closer to his chest.

After a moment of indecision, Snape gave into the embrace and clutched James' robes tightly as he sobbed against the Gryffindor's shoulder. James was surprised to find that touching Snivellus wasn't as gross as he expected. Sure, his robes would have to be cleaned excessively to remove all the snot and tears, but the warmth and closeness were...nice. Or a different adjective that didn't

make it sound like James actually *liked* hugging Snape. Because he didn't. That would be absurd. He expressed his horror at this idea by whispering, "Hey, it's okay. I've got you." James was vaguely aware that this response didn't convey much horror, but he defended it with the excuse-- *explanation* --that the more he comforted Snape, the faster the crying would stop so he could extract himself.

With this goal in mind, James eyed Snape's limp, greasy hair. He was afraid to touch it, but he remembered how good it felt when his mother ran her fingers through his and decided it was a necessary sacrifice. He could always scourgify his hand afterward. When James nestled his fingers in Snape's hair, however, it didn't feel particularly oily. It felt soft. He cradled the boy's head and let him cry.

James wondered if he would have been so quick to let someone hug him who'd hurt him so terribly. He supposed the difference was that he had friends who would hug him instead. Now that Evans had abandoned him, Snape didn't have anyone but other Slytherins, and James couldn't imagine *they* hugged him. If James was in Snape's position, he might let just about anyone comfort him, just so he wouldn't be so utterly alone. He tightened his hold at the thought, willing his hug to make up for all the ones Snape had been denied. James considered trying to explain this urge, but something about it just felt so *right* that he decided it couldn't possibly be wrong.

After a while, the sobs slowed and Snape tried to move away. James grabbed his chin and turned him toward him instead, using his thumb to brush away the remaining tears. Snape's puffy black eyes wouldn't meet his gaze, but he didn't recoil like James thought he would. His lip quivered, and James found himself wanting to brush his thumb across the chapped skin there as well. Snape probably wouldn't like that, though.

The moment turned awkward after a few seconds, and James dropped his hand. "I brought food."

Snape nodded, so James stood and returned moments later with the basket. He pulled out a sandwich and placed it on a plate before using the knife he'd asked the house-elves to pack to cut it in half. "See? No poison," he said as he took a bite. Snape glanced at the knife and made a strange garbled sound. James belatedly realized he was laughing. "Figured this was better than tearing it with my hands."

"Moderately," Snape agreed. He eyed the sandwich with suspicion, watching behind his curtain of hair to make sure the Gryffindor survived swallowing before picking up his half in his long fingers.

"So..." James started. He knew it would worsen the mood to talk about what happened, but he was unable to shake his curiosity. "Why were you crying?"

Snape stiffened, chewing and swallowing with small, precise movements. "None of your business, Potter."

Now that James had discovered how touchable and not-completely-disgusting Snape was, he couldn't resist the temptation to nudge him gently. "I'm not going to laugh or tease you or anything."

"Of course not," Snape retorted. He stared at the elbow James had used to nudge him as if he wasn't sure what to make of it. "That would be completely out of character."

"Oi! I'm doing my best to show you I've changed."

Snape rolled his eyes. "What an exciting twenty-four hours it must have been in the life of the new and improved James Potter."

James snorted. "Alright, so you don't trust me yet. That's fine. We've got all the time in the world."

Snape looked at him in alarm. "Potter, exactly how long are you planning on following me around?"

"Technically, I'm not following you. I'm just really excellent at finding you." James finished off his sandwich and licked his fingers messily. The disgust on Snape's face was a sight to behold. "In answer to your question..." James shrugged. "As long as it takes."

"To...do what?"

"Become your friend," James said easily. Once it was out of his mouth, he almost took it back. That hadn't been the goal, had it? He'd wanted to ease his guilt, not befriend the little git. The wariness in Snape's eyes was so comical, however, that James forgot to correct himself.

"Lucky me," Snape muttered.

James grinned. "That's the spirit. Glad you know what a gift it is to be my friend."

"It can't be worse than being your target."

James looked down, throat tight. He knew he wasn't supposed to let genuine remorse show through at this stage of the plan, but something about holding a crying Snape in his arms a few moments ago made it a lot harder to keep up the act. "I really am sorry," he said. "Even if you don't believe me." Snape huffed but said nothing, picking at his sandwich some more. "What happened to make you break down like that?" James asked. "You usually only cry when things get really bad." Snape gave him a look. "Yeah, yeah, I know the reason I know that is because I'm usually the cause. But I wasn't this time, was I?"

Snape must have taken pity on him because he finally replied, "You're not special, Potter." He glanced away. "You and your friends aren't the only ones who bully me."

James felt anger rise inside him. "What?" Snape flinched, apparently believing the anger to be directed at him. James didn't want that, but he couldn't seem to get a hold on his temper, so he quickly followed with, "Who's bullying you? What did they do?"

Snape sneered. "What do you care?"

"I'll...I'll hex them! I'll transfigure their hands into butterflies so they can't hold their wands."

Snape looked bewildered at the mental image but he answered sharply, "I'm not your toy, Potter. You can't claim to care about my well-being when it's someone else's fault when you're more than willing to hurt me yourself."

James closed his eyes and took a breath, summoning every ounce of patience he had--it was, admittedly, a rather limited supply. Of course this wouldn't be easy. There was no reason Snape should trust him, not after everything he's done. And really, James couldn't explain why he felt compelled to jump to Snape's defense anyway. He didn't have to feel guilty about the actions of *other* bullies. It was hard enough dealing with his own. And if James couldn't even come up with an explanation for why he cared so much, then Snape certainly wouldn't be able to.

Whatever the reason, James couldn't deny that hearing someone was hurting Snape made his blood boil. He supposed there was a part of him that believed if *he* stopped picking on Severus then the boy wouldn't be so broken anymore. Maybe it just hurt to learn that wasn't the case. "Tell me,

please?"

Snape hunched over, pressing at his temples. "Give it a rest, Potter."

"What do you have to lose?" James hadn't meant for that to sound so harsh, but he didn't take it back. It was true, after all.

The words seemed to cut Snape, and it took him a moment to find his voice again. "You really want to be my friend, Potter?" he asked. His voice was low enough to rattle bones.

"Yes."

"Then shut your insufferable mouth for once."

James did as he was told, and Snape looked shocked when he noticed. Recovering, he slumped in relief and opened the basket to see what else James had brought. There were two apples and a bottle full of the strange green liquid. Snape picked it up, a questioning look on his face.

James looked embarrassed. "The house-elves threw that in. It's a vitamin potion. They thought you might need it because, you know..." James trailed off, gesturing awkwardly at Snape. The boy snorted but opened the bottle and gave a sniff. After a pause, he downed it. James cracked a smile. "You won't eat a sandwich because you're worried I might have poisoned it, but you're perfectly fine with drinking a potion out of an unmarked bottle?"

Snape's lips twisted into a small smirk. "I can recognize just about any potion by smell alone. I would certainly notice if a basic vitamin potion had been tampered with."

James stared at him in wonder. He'd forgotten the Slytherin was actually quite intelligent. He supposed he must be, with all the time he spends in the library, but that level of skill with potions implied he did more than just read books.

Snape blushed when he noticed the other's admiring stare, and the sight made James' heart flutter. How had he never noticed how... *adorable* Snape was? With his blushing and his little smirks and his quiet confidence in his talents? James wondered if Snape would have been a Marauder if he'd been sorted into Gryffindor. He had the sneakiness and cleverness for it, and with a bit of urging, James was sure he could be put to use in the field of mischief. They could certainly use his potions skills. Sirius wouldn't speak to James for a week if he'd heard that particular train of thought, but it was nice while it lasted.

"How did you find me?" Snape asked, shifting uncomfortably under James' gaze.

It was James' turn to smirk. "If I tell you, there's no mystery. And I happen to think you enjoy a good mystery." Snape didn't reply to that but James knew he agreed. He could tell from the calculating look in Snape's eyes that he was already trying to work out the puzzle.

"Now that we've eaten, will you leave me alone?"

James pursed his lips as if he was considering it. "No." To his delight, Snape didn't even glare or sigh in disappointment. He actually looked a tad bit...pleased. It took everything in James' power not to whoop with joy.

"Well, if you're going to continue to bother me, you can at least make yourself useful." Snape pulled out his Transfiguration homework and gave James a pointed look until he did the same.

"Is this friendship?" James asked teasingly. "Exploiting others for homework help?"

“You and Black seem to think so with how often you copy from Lupin.”

“And *you* seem to pay an awful lot of attention to us.”

Snape had the nerve to look completely unaffected by this. “It’s called self-preservation. We Slytherins are excellent at it.”

James shook his head. “Leave it to Slytherins to have excuses at the ready for their creepy, perverted behavior.”

Snape shot him a dark look but his only response was to open his textbook to the appropriate page. James grinned at him and followed his lead.

By the time James left, it was nearing curfew. He whistled as he walked toward Gryffindor, unable to get the image of Snape’s soft smirk and blushing cheeks out of his mind. He gave up on whistling after a while because he was smiling too hard to make the sound properly. When he entered his dorm, he flopped on his bed with a contented sigh.

“Did Evans finally give in to your charms?” Remus asked.

James looked over at him, puzzled. “What?”

Sirius laughed. “Mate, when you walked in, you looked like your heart had just sprouted wings and jumped out of your chest.”

Peter grinned. “So did she?”

James’ heart really was beating out of his chest now, but for an entirely different reason. “Not yet, my dear Wormtail,” he said as smoothly as he could manage. “But I believe she’s softening.”

“Ooh,” Peter gushed. Sirius gave him a pat on the shoulder, and James returned his smile, but when his gaze caught Remus’, he knew he’d been caught. Thankfully, the werewolf said nothing and merely went back to his book.

A chorus of ‘goodnight’s followed shortly after, and James drew his bed curtains shut, allowing his facade to crack. He didn’t know what to do with the fact that *Severus Snape* had made his face light up so much that his friends thought he’d finally gotten Lily Evans’ attention. On that note, he didn’t know what to do with the fact that he hadn’t even thought about Lily Evans in at least twenty-four hours because he’d been too busy cozying up to Snape. And sure, Remus had said that doing so would endear him to Lily, but they both knew that’s not why he was doing this. He was doing it to ease his guilt. At least, he thought so.

Except that didn’t explain why he wanted to be friends with the Slytherin, or why he couldn’t stop thinking about his lips in that perfect smirk and his small form wrapped in James’ arms. It didn’t explain why he wanted to card his fingers through that stupid greasy hair or compliment Snape until his sickly yellowish skin turned pink. It didn’t explain why James was so damn happy--happier than he could remember being in a long time. Guilt didn’t explain any of it, but James was afraid to confront the only reason that might explain a whole lot of things.

He didn’t fall asleep until morning was fast approaching, but when he did, he dreamt he was falling into black, black eyes.

Chapter 4

“How about this one?” Peter asked, offering Moony the book he was looking at.

Remus read it quickly and shook his head. “This one doesn’t stick people together. It molds them into one giant person.” Noticing the inspired glint in Sirius’ eye, Remus quickly added, “Absolutely not, Padfoot. Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is no.”

Sirius gave him an innocent expression. “Why, Moony, I was just going to offer to buy you chocolate from Honeydukes for the next full moon.”

“Wormtail will make sure I have chocolate,” Remus replied easily.

Peter nodded. “Post-moon Remus is scary without chocolate.”

James closed the book he was looking at with a thump. “I love how you can prance around with a werewolf during the full moon with no fear at all but you’re terrified of our favorite bookish Gryffindor when he’s exhausted and in need of chocolate.”

“Wormtail’s right, though,” Sirius said. “I’d take a werewolf over this chocolate fiend any day.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “This chocolate fiend would appreciate it if you lot could get back on task so he has time to do his homework.”

“Remind us how many weeks ahead of classes you are?” James teased. “The rest of us haven’t even done the Potions essay due tomorrow.” When no one backed him up, he gasped in betrayal. “You did it without me?”

“Sorry, Prongs,” Sirius said without apology. “While you were ditching us for Evans yesterday, Moony made us do our homework.”

James did his best not to react to the lie from yesterday and instead clutched his chest in horror. “I’ll have to face the wrath of the Slug King all alone.”

“Or you could write your essay tonight,” Moony suggested.

“And what wrath?” Sirius asked with a snicker. “He’ll take down your picture?”

James’ jaw dropped. “He wouldn’t dare. It’s a stunning picture.”

“I guess you’d better write it then.”

James wondered if Snape would help him since James had helped him with Transfiguration the night before. Probably not. And if he did, he’d probably be a horrible teacher. Still, the thought of doing it with someone rather than sitting by himself in the library while his friends played

Exploding Snap in the common room was enticing. "I suppose you're right. How much time have we got before lunch is over?"

Sirius cast a quick tempus. "Ten minutes."

"Let's aim to find at least one possible spell before then, yeah?"

A series of agreements rang out, and the four researched in relative silence. James nearly leaped with joy when he found one. After sharing it with the others and receiving Moony's stamp of approval, the four made their way to Herbology, jittery with excitement for the upcoming prank. They only had a few weeks left to plan the final details, but now that they had a starting point, it would be a piece of cake to work out the rest.

As they entered the greenhouse, James winked at his favorite redhead. "Hey, Evans. Lunch next Hogsmeade weekend?"

She didn't even look at him before sending a spell flying that turned his robes plasticky and pink.

"I thought you said she was softening," Peter whispered.

James shrugged, not particularly upset about the whole ordeal, even if he looked like one of those Muggle dolls Peter's cousins liked to play with--Barnabies, maybe?--and made squelching noises when he moved.

James skipped dinner in the Great Hall again, this time with the excuse that he was writing that Potions essay, which, with any luck, would be true. He hadn't seen Snape all day, besides in passing, so he wasn't sure if the Slytherin was planning on eating with him again. One look at the map told James he wasn't in the Great Hall, so James made his now routine trip to the kitchens and tracked Snape on the map until he entered yet another abandoned classroom in the dungeons.

"You seem to have a pattern," James said as he breezed through the door.

"And you seem to be following me."

"Not following you," James said pointedly.

Snape glared, but there wasn't as much heat behind it as yesterday. He took the basket from James without another word and pulled out the sandwich, making a precise cut down the middle before handing half to James. The Gryffindor hid a smile. He liked that Snape was taking initiative now instead of fighting against him every step of the way.

"Any chance I could get some help on my Potions essay?" James tried.

Snape lifted a brow. "Did Lupin take ill while I wasn't looking?"

"First, Remus is pants at Potions, and you're brilliant. And second, you sort of owe me since I helped you with Transfiguration yesterday."

Snape rolled his eyes. "That was retaliation against you for following me around and being irritating, not a favor."

"Fine," James conceded, "but the first still holds, and I have to write it tonight. Either you help me finish it as quickly and painlessly as possible, or you ignore me, and I pester you with questions for

the next five hours.”

“I could always leave,” Snape drawled. James gave an exaggerated pout. Snape wasn’t impressed. “What are you, four years old?”

James tucked in his bottom lip. “Nonsense. That pout was sixteen years in the making. And if you left, I would simply find you again.”

“Not if I went to the Slytherin common room.”

James lifted his brows. “You’re really going to make that challenge?”

The color drained from Snape’s features. “That was not a challenge.”

James grinned wickedly. “So what I’m hearing is you’ll help me with my Potions essay as soon as I figure out a way into the Slytherin common room.”

Snape groaned. “You’re appalling. Heinous. Abhorrent. There aren’t strong enough words to describe how you make me feel.”

James smiled sweetly at him. “Awe, you’re making me blush.” Snape just glared, but James chided himself internally. Why did he keep turning all their taunts into flirtation? Whatever happened to harmless spite between rivals? He wondered if there was a curse that would permanently put his foot in his mouth. “Does that mean you’ll help me?” he asked before more playful banter or something equally atrocious could slip past his teeth. “If not, I’ll be forced to copy off of Sirius, which would be horribly tedious. His stupid pureblood family taught him to write in fancy calligraphy so his letters look like writhing piles of snakes. How am I supposed to copy off him if I can’t even read what he’s written?”

“Potter, *you’re* a pureblood.”

“But *my* parents understand that letters are for spelling words, not bloody artistry.”

Snape snorted. He looked away pensively, fingers fidgeting in his lap. “Do Black and the others know about...whatever this is?”

“Do they know we’re friends?” James noticed Snape was about to protest his word choice so he hurried on before he could. “Not yet. Well, I think Remus might have realized something’s going on between us, but I haven’t told anyone. He’s been covering for me actually.”

Snape sneered, and any soft emotion had been wiped from his face. “Wouldn’t want to damage your reputation with your new project?”

James ran a hand through his hair. That horrible nausea filled him again when he couldn’t truthfully refute the accusation. “It’s not that,” he lied quickly. “I just figured if we did this publicly you’d think it was a prank or something. I wanted to start over properly, without everyone’s eyes on us, at least until what we have is more stable.” It wasn’t a total lie, but it tasted sour all the same.

James wasn’t sure if Snape believed him. Instead of commenting, the Slytherin pulled out his Potions book and flipped to the correct page. “What do you have so far?”

James held up a finger and rifled through his bag for his parchment. Triumphant, he slapped it down in front of Snape.

The boy looked at him in horror. "This parchment is blank."

"Yup."

"It's due tomorrow."

"That's correct."

"The essay is meant to be five feet!"

"Gee, it's almost like you're in this class with me, seeing how well you know the requirements."

Snape pinched the bridge of his very prominent nose. "Just open your book, Potter."

James hummed happily and did as he was told.

The hours flew by, and before James knew it, the essay was complete. It was probably his best Potions essay ever, and he was actually half decent at the subject. To James' surprise, Snape was an amazing teacher--as long as you could laugh off his dark glares and grumbling. He knew, not only how things worked, but also why and who discovered them. He knew both the Muggle and wizard terms for each of the ingredients, as well as the magical and 'scientific' properties, whatever those were. He corrected James in his low, impatient tone and growled when James was being particularly dense. Snape's teaching voice was *hot*, and it was becoming more and more difficult for James to deny the revelation that had been unfolding since last night.

"You're brilliant at this," James said as he packed his essay away. "Have you ever thought about becoming a professor here?"

The Slytherin looked at him like he was mad. "Potter, I have no patience and my first instinct when someone gets something wrong is to thwack them over the head."

James laughed. "If only McGonagall had your level of self-awareness."

"Like you can talk. She actually likes you," Snape grumbled. "Bloody Gryffindors."

James smiled sweetly. "Everyone gives into my charms sooner or later. Feel free to surrender whenever. I won't judge you for it."

"Not likely, Potter." Snape smirked at him. "And Lily still hasn't, if your robes earlier today were any indication."

"You noticed those?"

"Potter, everyone noticed those. They were hideous."

"I dunno, Snape. I think pink is my color." It hit him then how casually Snape had brought up Evans, and his curiosity spiked. "Are you and Evans friends again then?"

Snape looked up sharply. "What do you care?"

James frowned in thought. "I don't like the thought of you being alone all the time."

"I'm not alone," Severus mumbled. And then, as if he didn't want James to hear but couldn't stop himself, he muttered, "You've seen to that."

James couldn't verbally express the warmth he felt at the blush on the Slytherin's cheeks or the

sadness he felt at hearing how isolated Severus was, so James pulled him into a tight hug instead. Severus went rigid at first, but slowly he let himself relax. James breathed in Severus' scent and was intrigued to find he smelled rather pleasant. Like apples or something equally fruity. For the first time, he wondered if maybe the limp greasiness of Snape's hair was actually just too much conditioner.

James felt warm everywhere their bodies met, and his heart ached with something he was afraid to name. Severus fit perfectly in James' arms, and James couldn't remember why he was trying so hard to maintain his denial. Surely there was nothing scary about wanting more of *this*, not when it felt so bloody incredible. And if there was nothing wrong with wanting to hold Severus close, then it was certainly alright to want to unravel his secret quirks, or feel his voice drum through his ribcage, or find the perfect combination of words to make him smile a real smile.

"Potter, you're choking me."

James released him quickly and had the decency to look ashamed. A quick glance at Snape, however, showed a deeper blush than before and only a mild expression of annoyance. "Sorry," James coughed.

Snape's lips twitched. "I didn't know you were such a sap."

"And I didn't know you blushed such a pretty shade of pink," James retorted before realizing how much he'd revealed. He really needed that foot-in-his-mouth spell right about now.

Severus ducked his head away, seemingly unsure if that was a compliment or a taunt. James unthinkingly reached out and took Snape's hand to reassure him. It was soft and delicate compared to the Gryffindor's Quidditch-calloused skin, and James found himself tracing small circles with his thumb. He noticed Snape's black eyes, wide and staring at their joined limbs, and suddenly James felt self-conscious. He removed his hand as if he'd been shocked. "Sorry," he said again.

"You're doing a lot of apologizing."

James looked at his hands. "I have a lot to apologize for," he said quietly, and they both knew he wasn't talking about hugging or holding hands.

"Me too," Severus whispered. When James glanced up, he continued, "You asked if Lily and I are friends again, and the answer is no. I've tried apologizing, but she won't listen. And part of me feels like I don't deserve her forgiveness anyway."

James exhaled, the futility of his own attempts pressing against his lungs. It was easy to forget that, beneath all the banter, Snape was still broken. James couldn't win the game until that changed--if he could even call it a game anymore. After far too long, he replied, "Sometimes words aren't enough to apologize for what you've done wrong. The best you can do is show you've changed through your actions." James looked at the Slytherin, a determined tilt to his lips. "Severus, I'm going to do whatever I can to earn your forgiveness. I know that there's a high chance nothing I do will ever be enough though, so I'm going to help you earn Lily's forgiveness along the way."

Severus met his gaze, but James couldn't read anything in his black eyes. "Why?"

James didn't know which part of his statement Severus was inquiring about, but he answered, "Because I feel responsible for everything that happened that day. She didn't deserve getting called...that, but you didn't deserve any of it either. And no one deserves to be alone."

Severus kept staring at him for several moments, but finally, he gave a quick nod and looked

away. They sat in companionable silence for a while. James used the lull in conversation to pull out the vitamin potion for Severus and an apple for himself.

“Why do you use so much conditioner?” he couldn’t stop himself from asking.

Snape snorted. “It keeps my hair from frizzing up. It’s even worse when I make potions, so I take precautions.”

James furrowed his brows. “Even though we made fun of you for it?”

Severus clenched his jaw. “It didn’t matter what I did. You would have found something to tease me for--if not my hair, then my nose or my skin or my robes. Surprisingly enough, I frequently make choices without consideration for you. I happen to prefer my hair like this.”

James ignored the tightness in his stomach at the accusation and fluffed Severus’ hair affectionately. “I think it would look cute all frizzy.” *James freaking Potter, shut the fuck up before you scare him off. It’s one thing for you (and probably Remus) to know that you’re...feeling things for him, but it’s another to let HIM see that.*

Severus looked wary of both the comment and the touch. “Excuse me if I don’t exactly trust your judgment when it comes to hair.”

James gaped at him. “I work very hard to capture the just-got-off-a-broom look when I style my hair, thank you very much.”

Snape scoffed. “It looks more like you just-got-out-of-bed.”

James wiggled his eyebrows. “Do you picture that often, Severus?”

Snape shoved him hard, and James cracked up. Severus was trying not to smile when he looked back at him. It took everything in James not to kiss that adorable expression off his face. Instead, he squeezed the Slytherin’s hand once more and stood.

“Thanks for helping with the Potions essay. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Severus looked at him warningly. “Don’t make a habit out of this.”

“Meeting you for dinner or begging you for help with my homework?”

Snape opened his mouth, and James was certain he was about to say ‘both’ but then he paused and replied, “The latter.”

James grinned so wide he probably looked like a madman. “Goodnight, Severus.”

“Night, Po--” Severus cleared his throat. “James.”

Chapter 5

When James slipped through the portrait, he wished he hadn't taken off his invisibility cloak. The common room was empty save for a few fourth years and the other Marauders. Remus had his nose in a book, Sirius was passed out with his head in Moony's lap, and Peter was sleeping in a lump on the floor. James began to tiptoe toward the stairs, but Remus' eyes flicked up to meet his. Damn those werewolf senses.

James forced a smile as if he'd been making his way toward Remus instead of fleeing. "What did you do to them, Moony? It's not even curfew yet."

Remus didn't buy his performance. He glanced at his sleeping friends with mild distaste. "I believe they're experiencing a food coma. There was an eating competition at dinner, and they've been like this ever since."

"Who won?"

Moony snorted. "I did."

"Good on you, Moony," James cackled. "Put them in their place."

"Yes, well I've been told I could put on a few pounds. I simply seized the opportunity." Remus placed a bookmark in his book and looked at James studiously. "Ready to talk?"

James sighed. There was no fighting with Moony when he got like this. A part of him was actually glad for the opportunity to talk about his feelings, even if another part--the part that was still tempted to make a run for it--shrieked in protest. "Yeah, alright. Shove Padfoot off your lap and meet me in our dorm. I don't want to be here when he starts throwing hexes."

"You should be safe. I don't think he'd wake up if we threw him in the lake." Remus deposited Padfoot's head gently on the couch, and stretched, back cracking with a painful sound.

James grimaced. "How are you holding up?"

"The full moon's this weekend, so about as well as can be expected." Now that the other Marauders could be there in their Animagus forms, the wolf didn't destroy Remus as much during full moons. The days leading up to each moon and the transformation itself, however, were still incredibly taxing.

Remus cast a locking and silencing charm on the door when they entered their dorm before folding himself up on his bed. James threw himself at the foot of it and stared up at the ceiling, cradling his head in his hands. The silence dragged on for a minute. Then two.

"So I think I'm in love with him," James said, as lightly as he could manage. When Remus didn't

reply, James started drumming his thumbs anxiously on the back of his neck. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Yes, of course," Remus retorted. "I'm just a bit surprised, that's all."

"Really? I thought you knew." James didn't add that he had *hoped* Remus knew because that meant Remus hadn't been scared off by his secret.

"Oh, I most certainly did," Remus said. "I just didn't think *you* did." He was smiling now, and James huffed in relief.

"When did you get so observant?"

Moony narrowed his eyes. "I've always been observant. What makes you think otherwise?" James shut his mouth, realizing what he almost gave away. He couldn't stop his eyes from darting to Sirius' bed, however, and Remus laughed when he saw. "I'm perfectly aware that Sirius fancies me, James."

James sat up, mouth agape. "You know? And the two of you aren't together yet?"

"I'm waiting for him to get the balls to tell me himself." Moony's lips quirked up. "And I like watching him squirm."

James stared. "You're evil, Moony. Truly evil. The professors may think you're the best of us, but I know the truth."

"Oh, shut it. We both know a bit of pining will do Padfoot's ego some good."

"Well, sure, but the principle of it--"

"You're stalling," Moony said with that small smile of his.

"I am doing no such thing--" One look at Remus stopped him in his tracks, so he whined instead. "Just help me."

Remus pursed his lips. "Start from the beginning. You started by trying to apologize, correct?"

"Yes, but he just kept thinking it was a prank, so instead, I decided to try to annoy him into listening--"

"Because that worked so well with Lily."

"Hey!"

"I'm just saying, you have a very particular technique. And a type, I suppose."

James furrowed his brow. "What do Snape and Evans have in common?"

"They both hate you."

"Ah, that." James shook his head to get back on track. "Well, as I was saying, I started following him around and bringing him food--because he keeps missing meals and he's already so damn scrawny, you know? And at first, he was all tense and twitchy and irritated, but after a while, he started to relax and then at one point he was crying--"

"You made him cry?"

"No, you prat, he was crying before I got there, and I didn't know what to do so I hugged him and he let me. After that, we got along a bit better, and he almost smiled a few times. Which of course, nearly killed me. Then at one point, I kind of held his hand, and Merlin, Moony, he's so cute when he blushes..." He stopped when he realized the werewolf was laughing at him. James hit him with a shoe.

"Sorry, Prongs," Moony wheezed. "It's just--when you fall, you fall hard. It's been, what, three days? I'm having flashbacks to when you decided you were in love with Lily."

"Oh, but Moony, this is so much worse," James said, collapsing in a dramatic swoon, "because I can't talk about him all the time or make it too public. He'll think it's a prank. And Sirius will be so shocked it *isn't* a prank that he'll shake me until I tell him where I hid the real James Potter."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Remus replied, before clarifying, "The keeping it private part, not the Padfoot interrogation. I don't mean to keep bringing up Lily, but the public harassment--"

"Seduction," James corrected.

"--didn't work out so well."

James scowled. "I know. But doing things in private just feels so...intimate. I don't have any experience with that. And with Lily, the banter was just a game for us. Severus hates me for good reason. How am I supposed to overcome that?"

Remus looked at him sadly. "I think you just have to keep trying and hope for the best. Either that or give up and cut your losses. You were really awful to him, Prongs, and he's not just going to forget that. If--" Remus closed his mouth, but James could see the words he didn't say. *If you had done to me what you did to him, I'd never forgive you.* The unspoken words felt like claws against his chest. "Perhaps you don't like to do things privately, but after all the things you've done to him publicly, the least you can do is be genuine and mature about apologizing. And maybe stop trying to annoy him."

"I don't even know if he likes blokes," James said tiredly, dropping his head on the mattress for effect.

"Did you even know *you* liked blokes a week ago?"

James snorted. "Nope. I didn't have a clue. Not until I started having dreams about his--"

"Prongs, I do *not* need to hear that."

"It was perfectly innocent, Moony! I was going to say his eyes! His beautiful black eyes--deeper than the Black Lake and far more fun to look into since you don't have to worry about a tentacle popping out and dragging you into their depths."

"Charming," Remus drawled before frowning. "You're serious about this?"

"No, I'm James," came the reply. When Remus narrowed his eyes, James took a shaky breath. "Yeah, I am. And I'm pretty sure Padfoot will never speak to me again when he finds out."

Remus tilted his head to the side. "He'll come around. I know it may not seem like it at the moment, but he cares about you more than he hates Snape."

"I hope you're right," James said, feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "How'd you get so wise, Moony?"

There was an amused glint to the werewolf's eyes. "I'm not wise. You and Padfoot just think so because I don't say every thought that pops into my head. It's not like any of you lot are subtle. I'd be surprised if Peter didn't know something was up with you and Snape."

"Wormtail knows?"

"Maybe not yet, but he's certainly not as oblivious as you and Sirius."

James laughed. "I never give him enough credit."

"None of us do."

They sat in silence for a few moments before James stood awkwardly, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck. "Thanks for this. I guess I'd better wake Peter and Sirius so they can get in their real beds."

"Don't forget to duck," Remus said, pulling out his book once more.

The next morning, James jumped out of bed with a spring in his step. Remus (and perhaps Peter?) knew how he felt about Severus, and the world hadn't ended. His quest to win Sev's forgiveness was going better than he'd hoped, and he had a new project on the horizon: getting Lily to forgive Snape. To do that, James decided that while the depth of his feelings for Severus should remain secret for a while, his newfound friendliness toward him must go public. He had yet to decide how to leak that truth, but he assumed he'd come up with something before the day was out.

Opportunity struck sooner than he was expecting. When someone pushed Snape's books off his desk during Potions, James rushed to Severus' side to help pick them up. Sev's hand slowed when he noticed James' presence, and he watched the Gryffindor warily as the two of them collected his things.

"Here," James said, offering him the last book. He was distantly aware that the class had gone silent as they waited for James to make a joke or transfigure Snape's books into rodents. When James instead smiled warmly at Severus, curious whispering broke out.

Severus didn't smile back or even make eye contact. He snatched the book out of James' hand and sunk back into his chair without a word. James frowned. He'd expected Severus to at least thank him. After all, James was the one with the most to lose from their public interaction. His entire reputation was on the line. And for his Evans plot to work, James needed Severus to act like they were friends. Otherwise, Evans wouldn't come to James with questions, and James would have no opportunity to vouch for the Slytherin.

He shrugged off his annoyance and disappointment and returned to his seat, forcing his mouth into a casual line as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Sirius was looking at him like he'd grown a second head, but Peter was deep in thought. James decided Remus might have been right about him after all.

The rest of the class went by without a hitch, but by the time lunch rolled around, James was the talk of the school. Most students were certain it was only a matter of time before the prank was revealed. Others decided James was fatally ill and delusional with fever. James even heard someone say Severus had him under the Imperius curse.

"I can't take the rumours any longer, Prongs," Sirius said as they sat down at the Gryffindor table. "What in Merlin's name was that with Snivellus this morning?" He looked as if the words had

been struggling to burst out all day.

James shrugged with forced nonchalance. "You're smart. Figure it out." He grinned at the frustration on Padfoot's face. While he knew letting his friend's curiosity run wild was probably not the best approach, he was relying on the fact that 'James Potter is in love with Severus Snape' would probably be last on his list of hypotheses. "Remus worked it out *ages* ago, and I think Peter's onto it too."

At this, Peter whispered something to Remus, who nodded solemnly at him. The two then turned to Sirius and mimed sealing their lips.

"Argh!" Sirius growled. He shook his finger at James. "I'll figure it out, Prongs. Just you wait. And when I do, you'll wish you'd just told me in the first place so you could avoid all the revenge I'll be taking." The threat was made less intimidating when he whined, "You know I hate being the last to know things."

James laughed. "Trust me, Padfoot. When you figure it out, you'll thank me for the few extra days of ignorant bliss."

Sirius spent the rest of lunch in studious concentration. James returned to his food with a smug smile on his face, pleased by the fact that perhaps his new love interest could be a public affair after all. He noticed Evans looking back and forth between him and Severus all through lunch--which was more than she'd looked at Severus since arriving at Hogwarts this year--so James felt confident that his project was well under way, even without Severus' participation.

Glancing at the Slytherin table once more, James smiled. Severus was looking at Lily with a hint of hopefulness. James worried he'd pissed Snape off with his gesture, but he felt confident Severus wouldn't mind if it meant Lily became his friend again. Sev's eyes flicked to James when he felt his stare, studying him with suspicion before turning his attention back to his food.

Dinner? James mouthed when he caught Sev's gaze once more.

Severus didn't nod or mouth anything back, but he lifted one eyebrow, and James knew it was a challenge: *If you can find me.*

James smirked, loving whatever their game had become. *You're on.*

Chapter 6

“That was some stunt you pulled earlier, Potter,” Severus said in greeting.

This time James found him in Greenhouse One which meant Severus was genuinely trying to challenge him. Of course, it wasn’t much of a challenge given the Marauders’ Map, but James was pleased all the same.

“What stunt?” James asked, sitting on a dirty but unoccupied counter. “I merely helped out a friend in need.”

“We’re not friends,” Severus reminded him.

“What term would you prefer?”

“Peers who historically have not associated with each other in any context except enmity but have recently upended tradition to follow the whims of an irritating Gryffindor with no respect for the status quo’.”

James laughed. “That’s a bit lengthy, don’t you think? And it doesn’t convey my warm and fuzzy feelings for you.”

“Shall I change that to ‘irritating Hufflepuff’?”

“No, no. Don’t let me hinder your creative genius. Let me know when the final draft is complete.”

Severus’ lip twitched. He sat on the counter beside James, and James appreciated the fact that it was just a tad small for the two of them side by side, forcing Severus to press gently against him. Severus drew his shoulders in as if to make himself smaller, so James nudged him with a reassuring smile. Severus relaxed a bit at that.

He took the basket from James and opened it before wrinkling his nose. “Sandwiches again?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” James said, trying not to swoon at the cuteness of Severus’ expression. “Is that not good enough for you anymore? Would *you* prefer to bring the food tomorrow?”

Severus shocked him by saying, “Yes.” He cut the sandwich in two with his precise Potions-skilled hands, and James noticed he didn’t wait for James to take a bite before digging in. The small gesture, as unconscious as it likely was, made his chest grow warm. “At the very least, we could have a different kind of sandwich.”

James grimaced. “Sorry. The house-elves aren’t well-versed in vegan cooking. It took me ages to convince them I wasn’t going to die without eating meat. I think they’re still waiting for me to keel over. I try to just be grateful for their efforts and not make any difficult requests.” James hadn’t considered Severus might be unhappy with his choice of food, and he felt guilty for being so

thoughtless. "If you don't mind skipping the whole cutting-in-half-to-check-for-poison ordeal, I'd be happy to bring you something else."

"Vegan?" Severus asked. His lips curled around the word like he was trying to taste its meaning.

"It means I don't eat anything that came from an animal."

Severus furrowed his brow. "Why?"

James couldn't tell him it was because turning into a deer on a regular basis made the thought of eating prey uncomfortable, so he just shrugged. "Animal rights, I suppose."

"That's...unexpected."

James felt his ears turn red. "Yeah, well, I don't tell a lot of people." He tried to cover up his self-consciousness with a laugh. "I guess it seems a bit out of character. Not very manly or whatever." Sirius had teased him for weeks after his decision, but he couldn't exactly say much since his animagus tendencies gave him an embarrassing weakness for ear scratches.

Severus snorted. "'Manly' isn't a word I'd use to describe you, Potter."

"Oi! I'm manly," James protested. "What makes you say that?"

Severus lifted an eyebrow before ticking off his arguments with fingers. "You strut around school like a model in a Muggle fashion show, you're a total sap, you hug me any chance you get, I seem to remember you attempting to hold my hand--"

"So what I'm hearing is you think I look like a model," James interrupted with a smug grin.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Of course that's the part you heard." He reached into the basket and pulled out his vitamin potion. "So now that you're insisting upon public chivalry, do Black and Pettigrew know that we're..."

"I told you your term is too long," James said. "And Peter does. I think Sirius is still trying to wrap his head around the whole thing. He probably still thinks it's a prank." James paused. "You don't, though, do you?"

Severus gulped down half the potion, taking extra time to answer. "I haven't decided yet."

"Well, by the time we graduate next year, I hope you'll accept that this is either an honest attempt at friendship or the most time consuming, poorly executed prank ever."

Snape nearly dropped the glass vial. "You're planning on keeping this up that long?"

"Why so glum?" James teased. "Am I keeping you from important dinner dates?"

Severus scowled. "I do have other things in my life besides you, Potter."

"But none of them are *nearly* as important, right?" No response. "Right?" James repeated in mock (half-legitimate) panic.

Severus took another sip, ignoring him. "Lily was looking at me a lot today."

"All thanks to my 'stunt' this morning, as you called it." James was surprised it had been so easy to get the first step out of the way. He figured it was a good sign that Evans was looking for any reason she could find to give in. "I'll have her running to you in tearful reconciliation in no time."

Severus looked skeptical, but he let it slide. "And how are your own attempts with Lily going?"

James flushed and hoped Snape wouldn't notice. "I haven't been trying all that much lately."

"I seem to remember you getting hexed for another date attempt just yesterday."

Was it James' imagination, or was Severus avoiding eye contact more than usual? He'd known Severus fancied Evans for years, but it pained him to see that was still true. James would keep his vow to get her to forgive him, but he couldn't deny it would hurt. He'd rather not play matchmaker with the boy he loved and the girl he used to. What really scared him, however, was that the realization that he would support Severus if he did love Lily--which meant he cared more about Severus' happiness than his own. When had that happened? Was that a side effect of love? Did that mean James hadn't really loved Lily? He certainly hadn't cared about *her* happiness enough to let her choose Snape.

James shrugged. "We keep up our banter because it's fun, but...I have my eye on someone else."

Snape raised a brow. "Do tell."

James laughed. "I'm not sure we're ready for that kind of conversation yet." He paused and added, "Maybe when I get upgraded to 'friend' instead of that ridiculous term I can't even make into a reasonable acronym."

After that, the conversation grew easier. They discussed ideas for their next Transfiguration essay and ranted about Divination and compared their favorite sweets.

Just as they started heading back to the castle, rain began to fall on them in buckets. It was only a few degrees above freezing so the water chilled James to the bone. He cast a water-repelling spell to clear his glasses. When he did, he noticed that Severus looked like a drowned cat, and James couldn't stop laughing.

"Flipendo," Severus muttered in retaliation, and suddenly James was on his back, still laughing but breathless with the wind knocked out of him. When he was only halfway recovered, he stood up and tackled the soggy robed Slytherin. Now they were both in the muddy grass, and James had the upper hand.

"Let go of me, Potter," Severus hissed, squirming in his arms.

"Not a chance," James puffed, struggling to hold him still.

"I said, *let go of me*."

"Make me."

"Levicorpus," Snape ground out. And then James was in the air, glasses lost in the grass below. He was dropped moments later, and by the time he managed to find his glasses, Severus was already halfway to the castle.

"Severus, wait up!" James ran after him, bubbly but still disoriented from being turned upside down. The Slytherin kept walking. When James caught hold of his shoulder and pulled him to a stop, the boy whirled on him.

"Leave me the fuck alone," he spat.

"Severus, I--" It took James a moment to realize the water on Snape's face was a mix of raindrops

and tears. The puffy redness of his eyes gave him away. James felt nausea flare up in him again, but this time it came with a chest pain that was almost worse. "Severus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"This time, Potter," Severus snapped. "You didn't mean to *this time*."

"I thought we were just having a laugh. I would never--"

"Except you would. You *have*. More times than I can count." Snape sniffled, wiping at his nose with his tattered sleeve. "When people pin me to the ground and ignore me when I tell them to stop, it's not fun for me, Potter."

"Sev, I'm sorry--"

"*Don't* call me that. Lily calls me that. And you're the reason she won't speak to me. *You're* the reason I have no one." Severus pushed him. "The Slytherins bullied me too, but it was never that bad until you raised the bar with that 'prank' last year. Now they think they can do whatever they fucking please, and the rest of the school seems to think so too. Even the *Hufflepuffs* shove me in the hallways, and the Ravenclaws tease me for the state of my undergarments. Do you know why my clothes are so tattered? Why my robes don't fit and nothing I own matches? Because my family is fucking poor! My mother was disowned when she married my Muggle father, and now she has nothing to come home to but an abusive, neglectful, piece of shit husband and a living room full of empty bottles."

Severus was shaking now, with anger or tears or cold. "And then you come in here, pretending you want to be my friend, so you can push me down in the mud and hold me there when I say stop. You probably don't even care that this was my last good set of robes, or that I'll never be able to afford a replacement." He looked at James with so much hopelessness it was impossible to swallow. "You want a fresh start? You want my forgiveness? Well, you're out of luck, Potter. You can't earn my forgiveness because you're still fucking hurting me." He crumpled then, letting out a heart-wrenching sob.

James made to hug him, comfort him, anything, but Severus lifted his gaze until his angry red eyes bore into James' soul. "Don't fucking touch me, Potter. Just--just get the hell out of my sight."

James stood there, shivering, for several long minutes before finally trudging back up to the castle. He felt his heart break into a thousand tiny pieces, and he imagined them making a trail of blood in the grass, leading away from a shaking pile of black fabric and scrawny limbs.

He was pretty sure this was the worst he'd ever felt. Not only had he ruined any chance of earning Snape's forgiveness, but he'd just been hit by a million reasons why they would never work together. Why he wouldn't ever be good enough for Severus Snape. And while a tiny part of him screamed that James Potter was more than good enough for any Slytherin, the rest of him knew Severus was right. There was no way he could redeem himself after what he'd done. He had ruined Snape's life and then somehow expected it would be easy to slip right into the boy's good graces. That for some reason he deserved a chance at redemption.

Maybe this was his punishment for everything he'd done. To have a glimpse of the witty and fascinating person that was Severus Snape, to fall for him, and then to be faced with the ultimate reality that he'd never get to know the Slytherin--never get to hug him or share smiles or stare in awe as the boy surprised him again and again. Because he'd made an unforgivable mistake--six years of them.

As he made his way through the halls, several first years scurried out of the way. He knew he must

look like death, drenched in rain and crying and filled with so much self-loathing. The Fat Lady had the nerve to shriek when he appeared, but James just muttered the password and sloshed up the stairs.

“Potter!” Evans yelled after him. “Can we talk?”

“Not now, Evans.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Whatever.”

When James kicked open the door to his dormitory, it was empty. Good. He didn't think he could deal with any of the Marauders tonight. They were just a reminder of all the horrible things James had done--the things James had planned, organized, and executed like they were a battle strategy, without ever considering the fact that his target was just a scared lonely boy. His “pranks” played through his mind on repeat. The times he and Sirius had thrown Snape's bag in the lake. The times he dropped extra ingredients into Snape's cauldron so it exploded and ruined his robes. The curses he'd cast to humiliate him in front of their peers. The hexes he'd thrown with no thought at all for the humanity of his victim. At that moment, James was overcome by such an intense hatred for himself that nearly vomited.

He collapsed on his bed without even bothering to take off his wet robes. He heard footsteps and closed his eyes to shut out whoever would inevitably appear.

“Prongs, did you just blow off Lily Evans?” Sirius asked.

Suddenly the effort required to say words was too much, and James just let out a pained moan and curled onto his side.

“Hey, mate, what happened?” Sirius sat on the mattress next to him, brotherly concern radiating off of him in waves. “You'll catch a cold like this.” When James didn't respond, Sirius took out his wand and started casting drying charms. James didn't have the energy to stop him. Didn't know how to tell him he deserved to get sick.

When James was still damp but considerably drier than before, Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder. “If you need someone to talk to, I'll be here.”

James forced himself to nod and say, “Shut the curtains, please?”

“Sure thing, Prongs.”

There was a sound of rustling fabric, and the light peeking through James' eyelids dimmed. He wanted to sleep, possibly forever, but he knew he wouldn't be able to until he was sure Severus had made it in okay. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the Marauders' Map. He felt a momentary rush of gratitude for Peter who thought to cast a waterproofing charm on it.

When ink appeared on the parchment, James sought out the name he'd looked for so frequently over the past few days. It was still hovering between Greenhouse One and the castle. James stared at it, begging it to move, for upwards of twenty minutes. Finally, the ink characters slid through the castle doors and made their way into the dungeons. James let out a sigh of relief when the name stopped in the Slytherin dormitory, but he didn't put it away just yet. He just stared, imagining Severus going through his evening routine as the letters moved about the room. Wondering if his eyes were still puffy. Hoping he hadn't caught a cold. Wishing he could take back the last hour. James couldn't think of much he wouldn't trade for a time turner right then.

But he didn't have a time turner. He had the Map. So he watched until the name stilled as Severus went to bed. And then he watched some more. He stared at the name until the ink bled into his dreams. Then he was falling, falling, falling into a more solemn blackness than he could possibly bear.

Chapter 7

James wasn't sure what time he fell asleep, but he awoke the next morning with both his glasses and the Map resting on his face and a killer headache to boot. When his attempt to breathe through his nose was met with resistance, he realized it was from congestion. So much for Padfoot's drying charms. He wondered if he was sick enough to stay in bed for the day, but then he remembered it was Saturday. Thank Merlin.

James checked the Map again before putting it away, expecting to see Severus still in the Slytherin dormitory. When he didn't see him, he scanned the Map until he saw the burnt umber letters deep in the dungeons--next to another name. *Lucius Malfoy*. James stared in disbelief. Malfoy had graduated already. There was no reason for him to be back here. Unless--

Unless he was recruiting for You Know Who. James knew it was happening at Hogwarts because Sirius had been fighting with Regulus over it, but it still felt unreal. The war was unfolding at their feet, but almost no one talked about it. As guilty as James felt about hurting Severus, he couldn't help the anger that flooded through him at the knowledge that Snape was fraternizing with Death Eaters. It was bad enough that he was part of the Slytherin Gang that bullied Muggleborns and called them slurs. Severus was never the perpetrator, but he hung around them, and he certainly never stopped them. James couldn't excuse that by any means, but he could hardly condemn Severus for that without being a hypocrite. Being a bully or a bystander was one thing, but becoming a Death Eater? There was no coming back from that.

Did he really think it was okay to beg for Lily's forgiveness while screwing around with the people who wanted her dead? Was he that selfish? What if he was already a Death Eater? What if while James tried to make up for his mistakes--while he was *falling in love with him*--Severus was plotting murder and passing along information to You Know Who? James had always suspected Severus wanted to join them. It was part of why he felt no remorse for bullying him until recently. Now that things had changed between them, however, having his suspicions confirmed felt like a betrayal.

Maybe there was another explanation. Jumping to conclusions wouldn't help either of them, and while Severus probably wouldn't tell him the truth, or even talk to him at all after last night, James knew he wouldn't be able to relax until he knew for sure if Severus really was one of them.

Severus' words from a few days ago popped into his head: *You and your friends aren't the only ones who bully me*. Maybe Severus was being forced into it, or perhaps he was convinced it was the only way to escape being tormented or even killed by his housemates. Severus was a half-blood, after all. The thought made James want to destroy every Slytherin or Death Eater who ever hurt or coerced Severus, but it also gave him enough plausible deniability for his anger at Severus to fade--at least until he had proof. His anger was instantly replaced by his own suffocating guilt,

but it was easier to bear than the betrayal, and he almost welcomed the return.

James didn't know how long he lied there, accompanied only by the sound of his sniffing, but at some point, the curtains opened to reveal one Remus Lupin.

"I snagged some toast from the kitchens." He set the plate on James' nightstand. "We're heading into Hogsmeade for a bit. Would you like to come with us?" No response. "Will you be okay without us here?" A short nod. "Anything you need us to get for you?" A shake of his head.

Remus started to leave, but James croaked, "Wait." The sound was pitiful and nasally. "There's a bag of galleons in my trunk. Could you..." He sneezed. "Could you order a new set of Slytherin robes for Severus?"

Remus looked at him for a long while. "Sure, Prongs. Do us a favor and go see Madam Pomfrey at some point, yeah?"

James tried to laugh, but it came off choked and wheezing. "Yes, Mum."

The curtains drew shut again, and James let himself fall into a restless sleep...

The rest of the day passed in a blur of nightmares and headaches and tissues. Sirius brought him lunch with a teasing comment about "rabbit food", but the concern in his eyes was evident--especially when the food was still sitting there hours later. The Marauders kept Evans from barging in when she demanded to see him, and Peter brought him a potion from Madam Pomfrey when James refused to visit her himself. James didn't tell him it was because Severus Snape's name was securely tucked into the Hospital Wing on the Marauders' Map, but from the look Peter gave him when he brought the vial, the small boy had his suspicions.

When Sunday rolled around, James forced himself out of bed, despite still feeling like there were bricks in his skull. He knew if he looked too pathetic Moony would make him stay in tonight, and James wanted to be there for his friend on the full moon. He still didn't leave his room, but he sat up and did homework and ate food when Padfoot brought it for him.

That night they shivered under the invisibility cloak as they waited for Madam Pomfrey to leave the Shrieking Shack. The cloak was too small for all three of them now that they were older, so Wormtail was in rat form, perched on James' shoulder. Sirius was looking at Prongs inquiringly.

"Does whatever's going on with you have anything to do with that thing with Snivellus yesterday?"

James nodded, aware that he was probably giving away the truth but unable to come up with an excuse.

Sirius pondered this for a while. "I think I've figured it out."

James gave him a tired look. He wasn't sure he could deal with losing his best friend tonight on top of everything else, but he supposed maybe the stress of that combined with his severe depression and waning cold might just kill him. That could be alright.

"You didn't want to tell me," Sirius continued, "because you were worried I'd freak out, but you've been trying to make friends with Snivellus to impress Evans." James stared at him blankly. "Only it didn't work because she knew it was all a ruse, and that's why she was demanding to talk

to you. You're worried she'll never go out with you now." Padfoot looked so proud of himself that James would have laughed if he'd had it in him to make such a sound.

"Padfoot, that's not--"

But Madam Pomfrey was making her way back to the castle then, so Sirius shushed him. Once she was out of sight, James whipped off the cloak and shrunk it to fit in his robes. And then the moon was rising, they were transforming, and a howl was ringing out in the night.

As usual, Sirius was antsy to get to the Hospital Wing while James and Peter just wanted to sleep. James longed for his bed even more than he normally did; his cold hadn't taken kindly to him pulling an all-nighter in the middle of winter. Moony was usually comatose for at least a few hours after the transformation, so James would have been just as happy to visit at lunch, but Sirius insisted they shower and change and then rush to his bedside to watch him sleep. Of course, they gave in. They didn't really mind after all.

Before slipping out the door, James grabbed the package from his trunk and addressed a quick note.

I can't make up for everything else, but I can replace the robes I ruined. - J

He knew Severus was still in the Hospital Wing with a cold because he kept checking the Map. Now that he had something tangible to offer him instead of suffocating guilt and hopeless apologies, James couldn't see him soon enough.

It was still early in the morning, so they didn't pass anyone in the halls. James hadn't had contact with anyone but the other Marauders since Friday night, and he was glad to keep it up a little longer. Even the portraits set his nerves on edge.

When they entered the Hospital Wing, James went to Severus' bedside. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed the boy was asleep. Quietly, he set the package down beside the various potions on Madam Pomfrey's cart. He knew Sirius and Peter had already gone back to visit Remus, so he stayed a moment longer, suddenly needing to make sure Severus was okay. James took note of his red nose and his skin, which was paler and clammy than usual. His hair was sweaty and stuck to his face in dark tendrils. He breathed in and out through his mouth as if his nose was too stopped up to do otherwise.

Despite his illness, James couldn't help but appreciate how peaceful Severus looked when he slept. His eyes were soft instead of pinched, and his lips no longer held the tension they did when he was awake. James brushed Sev's hair out of his face, feeling the burn of his skin beneath his fingertips. When Severus didn't wake at the gesture, James leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to his forehead.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, placing a kiss on his own fingers and then pressing them to Severus' cheek. "I'll make it up to you somehow. And I'll keep my promise about Evans."

He felt guilty at the thought of putting her in an unsafe position if Severus was a Death Eater or becoming one, but he decided Severus wouldn't hurt her even if he was. He cared about her too much. And James still didn't know for sure if Severus wanted anything to do with You Know Who. He couldn't make any judgments until he had proof.

Remembering a rumor about Death Eaters having a tattoo on their left arm, James pulled up

Severus' sleeve without thinking. He let out a sigh of relief when the skin was bare. He checked the other arm too to be safe. Just pale flesh and dark veins.

When the Slytherin's eyelids started to flutter, James made his exit, joining his friends in the other room. Moony wasn't awake yet, but Sirius was holding his hand, telling him a wizarding fairy tale, while Peter interrupted periodically to correct the details. James sat in the chair next to Peter. Sirius, as usual, was sitting on the bed.

Remus was frightfully pale, but his injuries were confined to the few places where he'd crashed against the walls of the Shrieking Shack before realizing his pack was there. After that, Moony had calmed down, and the Marauders felt comfortable leading him into the Forbidden Forest for a run.

"...and then the wizard cast a spell to rid the girl of her ungodly acne and terrible personality," Sirius said.

"It was her warts," Peter retorted.

"What kind of Muggle suddenly becomes covered in warts? One or two, I understand. But a crop of warts? That's ridiculous. Acne makes far more sense."

"Warts spread! They're an infection!"

"You're speaking from personal experience, I presume?" When Peter flushed and didn't respond, Sirius made a face. "Now that I know that scarring piece of information, I beg you to shut up and let me finish." Sirius resumed the story in his soothing voice, and James found himself dozing off to the sound.

"It's a slipper, not a hat!" Peter squeaked. James nearly fell out of his chair as the sound woke him from his impromptu nap. "What's the point of giving the cauldron a hat?"

"It would look adorable," Sirius replied indignantly. "Moony would agree if he was awake."

"But the cauldron has a *foot* that makes *noise* when it *hops*! The slipper is necessary to the story!"

"Why don't you tell it then?" Sirius grumbled. He turned back to Remus with a dopey look in his eyes.

"He should be up in a couple of hours, boys," Madam Pomfrey said, entering with a cart full of potions. "It wouldn't hurt to grab some breakfast, and perhaps head to a class or two?" Then she noticed James and tutted. "Mr. Potter, you are still unwell, are you not? Keep away from my Hospital Wing until you are no longer contagious--unless you'd like me to strap you to a bed and force potions down your throat?"

James stood quickly. "No, thank you. I'll just be going."

She nodded her approval. "I'll get you a few more potions before you go. You're frightfully pale."

James grinned tiredly as he followed her out of Moony's private room. "You always know how to make a guy feel good about himself."

She tutted once more but gave him an affectionate smile. "Come see me if you're not feeling better by tomorrow."

James took the offered potions and tipped his head to her. Before he could leave, however, a

question struck him. “Madam Pomfrey, why *aren’t* you strapping me to a hospital bed and forcing potions down my throat?”

The woman tilted her head to the side, choosing her words carefully. “I decided it was not in Mr. Snape’s best interest to have you around, Mr. Potter.”

“Did he say something to you?”

Madam Pomfrey gave him a stern look. “He didn’t have to. Mr. Snape has been in my Hospital Wing almost as many times as Mr. Lupin, and nearly all of them have been somehow connected to you or Mr. Black.”

James swallowed, nodding. “I don’t plan on bothering him anymore.”

She huffed. “I’ll believe it when I see it. I have a soft spot for you because you take such good care of Mr. Lupin, but I don’t take kindly to people who endanger my students.”

“I know,” he mumbled. “Thanks for the potions.”

She gave him one last appraisal, and James couldn’t tell if she was judging his health or his worth as a person, but eventually, she nodded. James was filled with an even greater heaviness as he headed toward the Hospital Wing exit. He felt black eyes watching his every move but didn’t dare turn around.

Chapter 8

After James left the Hospital Wing, he couldn't make himself go to breakfast. He didn't want to be in the Great Hall surrounded by people, and he didn't want to be in his dorm room alone with himself. He didn't really want to *be* at all, so he walked aimlessly through Hogwarts, taking whichever staircase or path appeared before him. He stopped when he came face to face with the golden eagle that guarded Dumbledore's office. When the entryway revealed itself, he decided Hogwarts must want him there for a reason.

Dumbledore was tinkering with a strange object when James walked in. It looked like a bit like a Muggle cigarette lighter, but several pieces were disconnected from the main body and scattered about the desk.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore greeted cheerfully. "Sit, sit."

James did as he was told. "Is there a reason you called for me, sir?"

"Oh, it was not I who called for you. Hogwarts has a way of sending me those who need assistance." Dumbledore set down the lighter and looked up at him through his spectacles. "There is much weighing on your mind. Perhaps I can lighten the burden."

James looked at his hands, deciding how much he should say. He didn't want the Headmaster to think poorly of him. He was used to being well-liked, and he wasn't really ready to let that go yet. But he also wasn't going to get anywhere by sitting in silence. "Sir, am I a bad person?"

Dumbledore laughed. "That raises more questions than answers. Are you a bad person to whom? What amount of unkind deeds secures one's classification as such? Is your status as a good or bad person determined by actions or thoughts? By the past, present, or future?"

James didn't know what to make of that, so he said, "I really hurt someone. Someone I used to hate but now care about very much. And I think everyone but me could see it." He thought of Madam Pomfrey's disappointed expression, and his stomach clenched.

"Sometimes it takes another perspective to see the error in our ways."

James gave a bitter laugh. "It shouldn't have taken another perspective to see how fucked up it was to treat a person the way I did." He added a quick, "sorry" for his language.

Dumbledore didn't speak for a long while, so James looked up at him. When he did, he found those blue eyes gazing at him with a clarity and intensity he'd never seen before. "Mr. Potter, I don't think you are a bad person. You've done bad things--unforgivable things, perhaps--but you haven't crossed into the threshold of no return. You care deeply for the people who have earned your good will, and you cannot kill even those you despise." The look Dumbledore gave him recalled the

Shrieking Shack incident, and James felt another round of nausea. He'd nearly forgotten. On top of merciless bullying for years, James had also, for a moment, considered letting Moony kill Severus. The only thing that had stopped him was the knowledge that Remus wouldn't forgive himself if he killed Severus. It would have destroyed him.

"I did that for Remus," he admitted, hating the weakness in his voice.

"Whatever the reason, you made the right choice that night. And you're on the edge of making the right choice again."

James furrowed his brows. "I am?"

"You seek Mr. Snape's forgiveness," Dumbledore started, ignoring James' gasp of surprise, "but you forget that you have taken so much from him, and to take that as well will resolve nothing."

"I don't understand, Professor."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Don't seek his forgiveness. Seek your own redemption. To do that, you must give, with no expectation of reward. Being a good person is not defined by the opinions of individuals. It is defined by repeated actions motivated by care and love. Don't ask his forgiveness. Give to him. And if you happen to earn his forgiveness along the way, that is not an endpoint but a sign you're headed in the right direction."

James stared at him, stunned into silence by the helpfulness of the advice. He'd wanted to talk to someone, but he'd always believed Dumbledore to be a bit bonkers, and he hadn't actually expected to receive useful feedback. "Thank you, Professor." Dumbledore nodded and returned to his tinkering. James rose from his chair.

"Oh, and Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"The threshold I mentioned. I fear Mr. Snape will soon be faced with the choice to cross into it or turn his back on it for good. Perhaps your redemption can begin with helping him make the right choice."

James' hands clenched into fists at the thought that Dumbledore *knew* You Know Who was recruiting in his school and was doing nothing--nothing besides offering cryptic comments to students like himself, apparently. James wondered if Dumbledore had knowingly let Lucius Malfoy into Hogwarts. He wanted to yell at the man. For Severus. For Regulus. For all the Muggleborns who would be killed at the hands of students for which Dumbledore was supposed to be responsible. But he didn't have the energy. He nodded and left without a word.

As James sat through his morning classes, he considered Dumbledore's advice. Even when earning Severus' forgiveness had stopped being a game to him, it was still a prize he could win. But if he kept looking at it like that, he could never truly earn it anyway. Now that he'd blown his chance, he had an opportunity to do the right thing. He would help Severus in any way he could, and he wouldn't ask for forgiveness. James couldn't even forgive himself. How could he expect Severus to?

With a heavy heart but a new goal in mind, James felt determined. He'd already replaced the robes he'd ruined, and he would continue to work toward reuniting Lily and Severus. He wondered if he could be like one of those fairy godmothers from Muggle stories. He'd stay out of Severus' life

unless he could fix things or make things better for him. He'd help Severus befriend or woo Lily, whichever he preferred, and buy him nice things when he needed them. That could work, right? James tried to ignore the way his jaw tightened at the thought and turned his attention back to the professor.

He made sure to take thorough notes for Severus while Sirius and Peter took turns taking them for Moony. James was pretty sure professors looked forward to the days preceding and following the full moon since it was the only time the Marauders could be expected to behave. None of them would dare risk detention on the night of the transformation, and Moony would kill them if they got thrown out of class when they were supposed to be taking notes for him.

James sensed Lily's eyes on him several times, and the one time he accidentally glanced up at her, the threatening look she gave reminded him that he had blown her off earlier that weekend. Whatever conversation she was planning was likely to be a lot less fun now that her rage was three days in the making. He wondered briefly what the talk was to be about, but then class began and he was busy taking notes.

After class, James was walking to the Hospital Wing with Peter and Sirius when Lily finally got a hold of him.

"Potter!" she called out. "We need to have a talk."

James considered pretending he couldn't hear her, but he didn't want to deal with her wrath, and he knew he'd have to talk to her if he wanted to help Severus. He turned around, trepidation clear on his features. "Alright, Evans. But I'd appreciate it if you could leave me in one piece. Moony's in the Hospital Wing, but I'd rather visit him than join him."

Lily looked sympathetic for a moment. "How is he?"

"I don't know yet. We were just on our way there."

Lily's face twisted as she wrestled with her determination to talk with James right then and her desire for Remus to have his friends at his side. "I'll make it quick."

James sighed and shooed away his friends. He offered his arm out to Evans, and she grabbed his wrist, dragging him into the nearest empty classroom.

"What do you want?" he asked when she released him.

She crossed her arms. "Black told me you've been trying to befriend Severus to make me like you."

James groaned. "That's what this is about? Merlin, why does everyone think I'm doing this for you?"

Evans blinked. "You're not?"

James looked at her with barely concealed accusation. "You abandoned him when he most needed a friend, and now you have the audacity to think he's just some tool to win your affections?"

Lily's eyes lit with fire. "I abandoned him? He called me a Mudblood. I tried to help him, and he made it clear he has no use for people like me."

"I didn't--" James closed his eyes. "I know what he called you. And you didn't deserve that. But Severus didn't mean it. He only said that because I pushed him too far."

“Since when are you two on a first name basis?” she snapped.

“Since I pulled my head out of my arse and bloody apologized!”

Evans looked surprised, but she didn’t soften. “I’m not going to apologize to him. He’s the one who needs to apologize to me.”

“He has!” James said, suddenly angry that no one could see Severus the way he did. “He stood outside Gryffindor Tower every night for the rest of last year, even though that meant getting teased and harassed by Sirius and Peter and me, all because he wanted you to know how sorry he was. And I’m sure his Slytherin friends didn’t take kindly to him begging at your feet either.”

Lily scowled. “That’s not my problem. I told him not to be friends with those arseholes.”

James laughed bitterly. “Who is he supposed to be friends with, then? Everyone hates him, regardless of their House. And even if he could make it at Hogwarts all alone, he still has to sleep in the same room as Avery, Mulciber, Rosier, and Wilkes every night, so he’d damn well better be on their good side rather than their bad.”

“You know as well as I do that this war is bigger than schoolyard alliances.” Lily’s voice was deathly calm. “If Severus spends his time with Death Eater wannabes, then when we graduate, he’ll end up fighting for You Know Who. In case you’ve forgotten, Death Eaters *kill* Muggleborns. That means my family and I will be at the top of their hit list. You’re a pureblood, so maybe you can just ignore what’s happening in the world, but I can’t afford to be any less than three steps ahead of You Know Who and his lackeys. Sometimes that means making tough choices.” There were tears in Lily’s eyes now, if not in her voice. “You think I don’t wish I could just forgive him and move on? You think I don’t miss him? He was my oldest friend--my *best* friend. But he proved he’s no longer a safe person anymore, and there’s nothing I can do to change that.”

James sighed, feeling the weight of the war heavier on his mind than ever before. “I can’t ask you to put Severus before your family or, Merlin, your life. It’s just--” He paused to collect his thoughts. “If we can’t be there for him now when the stakes are lower than they will be out there, then how can he possibly believe we’ll have his back? He isn’t a pureblood, and he doesn’t have wealth or a powerful family name. The only way he has a chance is through his friends, and right now, the only people he can count on are other Slytherins. I’m not saying you should forget the war or forget what he said to you. I just think it’s important for you to understand that we’re his only shot at a different future. If we abandon him, we’re ensuring his fate as a Death Eater.”

Lily faltered for a moment, and James thought she was going to give in, but then she shook her head fiercely. “No. You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to put that responsibility on me. It won’t be my fault if he chooses to associate with murderers and pureblood supremacists. It will be his own. Some people have a rough lot in life, but our choices make us who we are. He didn’t choose to have a shitty home life, but I didn’t choose to be a Muggleborn, and if he becomes a Death Eater, that’s on him. I won’t carry that burden with me for the rest of my life. Maybe you’ll blame me, or maybe he will, but I won’t blame myself.”

James stared at her for several moments before saying softly, “He doesn’t blame you. He blames me. For everything.” He gave a bitter laugh. “I blame myself too. I thought I was being selfless for once, trying to make things better for him, but I guess I’m still just trying to ease my own guilt.” A thousand emotions flickered through his mind. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” He gave her a sad smile. “I understand if you never forgive him, and I know you don’t give a rat’s arse about me, but it would mean the world to me if you would at least hear him out.”

Lily looked stunned by his display of vulnerability. James was a bit stunned himself. She finally

gave a curt nod. "I'll think about it." With that, she left the room.

James sunk into a chair and dropped his head into his hands. He spared a thought for Moony before deciding Padfoot and Wormtail would be company enough. After that conversation, James wasn't exactly in the right mindset for cheerful bedside manners. His mind was stuck on the developing war, his own guilt, and the hopelessness of his situation. How could he make things better for Severus without getting Lily to forgive him? How could he ask Lily to forgive Severus when she had good reason to stay away? How was he supposed to "redeem" himself like Dumbledore said if he couldn't manage to do a single good deed, let alone a lifetime of them? He didn't have answers to any of his questions, but he muddled through them in desperate silence until lunch ended. Afterward, he wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed, but he forced himself to go to class. He still had notes to take, after all.

Chapter 9

The rest of the day passed without incident. James caught Lily staring at him several times, but for once, he didn't think to tease her for it--not even for show. Sirius and Peter were still looking at him like he was dying from a blood curse, but his health was slowly improving, so he was starting to feel a bit more like himself.

Deciding to spend dinner with Moony since he'd bailed at lunch, James stopped by the kitchens to grab some food.

"Will you be wanting the usual, sir?" a house-elf asked.

James nearly flinched at the question, hating the reminder of how well things were going only a few days earlier. "Yes," he said. "But add an extra sandwich with meat and cheese--and something chocolatey for dessert."

Before James stepped into the Hospital Wing, he pulled out his invisibility cloak. It was symbolic more than anything since Severus would know it was him, but he liked the idea of being anonymous as he gave his assistance. It would help him to keep Dumbledore's advice in mind.

When he entered, Severus was asleep again. James frowned when he noticed the robes were still in their package, but perhaps the Slytherin had slept all day and hadn't noticed them yet. Carefully, he set down the vitamin potion and non-vegan sandwich alongside the notes he'd taken that day. He knew Pomfrey could give Severus all the potions he needed, and food too, but it felt important to continue their little ritual. He cast one glimpse at Severus' sleeping form before heading to Moony's room.

Remus was wide awake, but he still looked like he'd been trampled by hippogriffs. James tossed him the chocolate cake the house-elves packed and sat in the chair.

Even in his injured state, Remus caught it easily with his werewolf reflexes. "There's my favorite Marauder."

"Well, I'm flattered, but we both know that's not true."

Remus smiled as he unwrapped the cake. "I'll say whatever it takes to keep the chocolate coming."

James grinned. "If you say anything even closely resembling a declaration of love to Padfoot, he'll marry you under a chocolate waterfall and open a shelter for unwanted chocolate frogs in your honor."

"While that is an enticing picture, I'm concerned you're laboring under the assumption that chocolate frogs are alive--and also that placing anything made of chocolate within my reach can be considered 'shelter'."

James laughed. "Well, he'll buy you a chocolate factory then."

"Mmm...that's better." Remus nibbled at the cake with reverence.

James took out his sandwich and couldn't resist the urge to cut it in two. He tucked one half away before digging into the other. "So, what did I miss at lunch?"

"A lengthy list of conspiracy theories Padfoot has concocted to explain why you're acting...the way you've been acting lately."

James perked up hopefully. "Any good ones?"

"I myself was rather fond of the accusation that a horde of Wrackspurts swarmed your brain and is now controlling your every move."

"What the bloody hell is a Wrackspurt?"

"No idea. I think they're those creatures that batty Ravenclaw is always going on about. What's his name?"

"Xanthophyll," James said with confidence.

"That's the yellow pigment in egg yolks."

"Why in Merlin's name do you know that?" When Remus opened his mouth, James stopped him. "No, don't answer that. I fear I know what you're going to say." He paused dramatically, before whispering, "*Books*," with as much horror as he could manage.

"Very funny." Remus was now picking chocolate crumbs out of the bed sheets and popping them in his mouth. "Sirius didn't come close to the truth, of course, the oblivious mutt, but I've been wondering about your behavior myself."

James let his head drop against the top of the chair. "I'm a fucking idiot, and also possibly the most terrible person alive."

"I happen to know personally that neither of those is true."

"I've ruined everything." When there was no response, James lifted his head to find Remus giving him *the look*. It was a look Remus specifically crafted for James and Sirius when they were being particularly blockheaded or melodramatic, as both were wont to do. "I'm not exaggerating this time!" he objected. "Severus is mad at me--probably permanently--and I think Lily is too."

"So nothing's changed then," Remus said.

James flicked a stray piece of lettuce at him. "I'm serious."

"No, you're James."

If Remus wasn't already in the Hospital Wing with severe injuries, James would have throttled him. "What happened to the sympathetic and compassionate Moony I was so looking forward to seeing?"

"A wolf broke all of his bones and dragged him through the woods in the middle of the night. He doesn't have the energy to deal with Potter drama."

"It's not drama," James retorted. "It's...it's..." James was fairly certain Remus was lifting a brow,

but his forehead was wrapped in bandages so he couldn't tell. "Okay, fine. It's drama. But it's *awful*, Moony."

"Well, whatever it is, I'm certain it's not as hopeless as you're making it out to be." His expression softened. "Regardless of what you may think, you're a really excellent person most of the time, James."

"And the rest of the time I'm a monster," James muttered.

Remus' lip twitched. "One could say the same about me. But I have enough self-loathing for the both of us, don't you think?"

"Moony," James said, stepping out of his misery and into pep talk mode. "You're not a monster, and you certainly can't blame yourself for--"

"But I am, and I do." When James opened his mouth again to object, Remus continued, "See how frustrating it is when someone you care about simplifies their entire existence down to their worst parts?" James shut his mouth. "Don't do that to yourself. For me, if not for you. You've done bad things. Grow from them and get over it." Remus crumpled up the cake wrapping and set it on his medicine cart. "Now, explain to me what I missed in Transfiguration. I'm not awake enough to make out Padfoot's ridiculous calligraphy."

The next morning, James awoke with only the slightest stuffy nose and a bit of a headache. To his relief, the nausea and chest pain he'd been fighting for the last few days were barely noticeable. He supposed he had Moony to thank for that, so he selected the best pieces from his secret chocolate stash (specifically for occasions such as these), and headed to the Hospital Wing to express his gratitude.

He was an early riser, so the other Marauders weren't up yet, and the rest of the castle seemed to be asleep as well. Because of that, his heart stopped at the sound of the stuffy voice that greeted him when he entered the Hospital Wing.

"Potter."

James turned to see Severus awake and glaring at him. The sight would have been comical if James' insides weren't tearing themselves to shreds. Only Severus' head was visible since the rest of him was tucked under the blankets, but the package was unwrapped beside him.

"Um, hi," James said awkwardly. When Severus just kept glaring at him, James pulled up a chair. He shifted uncomfortably. Nowhere in his plan did he account for what he would do if Severus called out to him. He'd assumed the Slytherin would never speak to him again. Suddenly all of his vows to keep his distance and only help from afar slipped from his mind.

Severus continued to say nothing, but his mouth twisted like he was trying to form words. "I don't need your charity," he managed finally.

James tilted his head. "It's not charity if it's my fault yours were ruined. I've just replaced them." He knew what Severus was thinking from the strained expression on his face: the replacements were nicer than any robes the Slytherin owned. After a slight hesitation, Severus nodded. James wasn't sure if he was supposed to leave now, or if Severus wanted him to stay. He probably had a couple more minutes before Pomfrey spotted him there and chased him out of her precious Hospital Wing, but he didn't want to make Severus uncomfortable, so he stood to leave.

“Potter,” Severus said again, this time with curiosity rather than indignation.

“Yes?”

Severus’ mouth twitched again with words unsaid. He coughed once and then fell into a hacking fit that lasted several seconds. When he recovered, he met James’ gaze steadily. “Yesterday when you dropped off the package, I seem to recall you...” he trailed off, unsure how to finish.

“I meant what I said about helping get Lily to forgive you. Even if you don’t want me around anymore. I’ll keep trying. You won’t even have to speak to me again if you don’t want to.”

Severus shook his head slightly. “No, that’s not what I--” He cleared his throat, but it didn’t make his congestion any less audible. “You kissed me.”

“Oh,” James said, feeling a blush creep up his neck. “Right, um, sorry.” He groaned, knowing he’d fucked up yet again. “I know you said you wanted me to leave you alone and everything so that probably wasn’t something you were comfortable with. I didn’t mean to do it, but you just looked so peaceful and I--”

“Potter, shut up,” Severus interrupted, amusement tingeing his voice. James exhaled in relief. Severus laughing at him was something he could deal with. Severus feeling hurt or violated, he couldn’t. He wondered why the Slytherin didn’t ask what James had been doing with his sleeves. Maybe he just thought James was losing it. Or maybe he didn’t want to deal with the topic of Death Eaters or You Know Who. As much as James wanted answers, he also didn’t want to spoil the moment.

He sunk into the chair again, confident Severus didn’t want him to leave but not certain where exactly they stood. “I understand if you never want to see to me again, but I was hoping the fact that you haven’t hexed me yet means you’re willing to give me another chance?” Severus studied him for a long moment, and James couldn’t help but ramble to fill the uncomfortable silence. “I was thinking maybe we could have a safe word so I know when I’m doing something wrong or hurting you, and I can stop before I fuck everything up again--”

“Aren’t safe words for sex?” Severus asked.

James went red again, and wow, he should really just have stayed in bed today, because he was clearly not capable of being out in public. “I’m not propositioning you,” he said as evenly as he could manage. Then, noticing Severus’ smirk, he added, “Although I wouldn’t say ‘no’ if you’re offering.” It was Sev’s turn to blush, and James laughed it off. “Kidding!” *Sort of.*

When Severus gave him a look that could best be described as fond exasperation, James felt the emptiness of the past few days slowly trickle away. “So, what do you say?” he asked, unable to hide his nerves.

“Pineapple,” Severus drawled.

“What?” James wondered if his mind had finally given out from the stress of the last few days.

Severus’ lips twitched. “Our safe word.”

James smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

Right on cue, Madam Pomfrey screamed, “Mr. Potter, get away from my patient this instant!”

“I was just grabbing a few potions from the cart,” he lied, stuffing a few in his robes at random.

James lifted Severus' hand to his lips and pressed a quick kiss to his knuckles. "Dinner tonight?"

Severus didn't even blush this time, annoyance clear on his features. "I'll still be here tonight, you prat."

James gasped. "You can't just *tell* me. Where's the challenge in that? Take it back."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'll be in a mysterious location that cannot be disclosed at this time."

James smiled sweetly. "Much better." His eyes went wide when Pomfrey's hands closed around his shoulders and lifted him bodily from his seat. He realized he hadn't delivered Remus' chocolate, but he supposed it could wait until lunch.

"Out you go, Mr. Potter," she clipped, dragging him out the doors. "And--"

"Don't come back until I'm no longer a risk to your patients," James finished with a wink. "I know the drill."

Chapter 10

Classes seemed to drag on forever as James waited in anticipation for dinner with Severus that evening. The only thing that kept him from zoning out completely was his task of note-taking. He'd have to copy the Potions notes onto a new sheet of paper later because he'd accidentally started doodling little hearts on the page.

He didn't know where he and Severus stood, but wherever it was, it was better than where they stood hours earlier, and James felt like life had been breathed back into him. High on unexpected happiness, James chased down Lily after class.

"Evans," he greeted, leaning against the stone wall as sexily as he could manage. They were in public, after all, and he had a reputation to maintain.

She rolled her eyes. "What, Potter?"

"I was hoping for a follow-up after yesterday," he said vaguely, loving the way Lily's friends looked at her in surprise, believing their meeting to have been of a more sensual sort.

She looked like she wanted to hex him, but apparently, she wanted to speak with him more, because she nodded and took off without another word. He followed her into an unused classroom and shut the door behind them.

She whirled on him. "You were right."

"I was--what?"

"You were right," she repeated, this time with obvious misery. "Severus is responsible for making his own choices, but this may be his last shot at something other than following You Know Who. I care about him, and if there's any chance I can keep him from becoming... *that* ...then I want to try." She sunk into a chair, dropping her head into her hands. "I hadn't even considered how alone he must feel. How few options he has. And obviously that doesn't excuse him, because having few options doesn't mean you should consider *serial killing* as one of them, but...I've just been so scared. The professors aren't talking about it or offering counseling, and everyone's trying to distract themselves instead of dealing with what's happening, but I can't stop thinking about it. Every morning in the paper, there's another dead Muggle family. I feel sick from the time I wake up until I can verify it isn't Petunia's name, or my parents', and then I feel sick again for being *relieved* when someone's family is dead. Relieved because someone else was unlucky this time instead of me."

She lifted her head and ran shaking hands through her hair. "But Sev doesn't even have a family--not the kind people are supposed to have. I was all he had, and I left him. Part of it was the fear, but the more I think about it, the more I realize a bigger part was pride. I hated the fact that I defended him for so long, even when everyone told me I was naive for trusting a Slytherin, and then he

proved them all right.” She bit her lip, trying to keep her tears at bay. “We were supposed to always be there for each other, and I gave up on him--over *one mistake*. God, I can’t believe it took talking to Black and having you yell at me for me to realize it. I’m a horrible friend.”

“No,” James said quickly, wrapping an arm around her to comfort her. He was surprised when she let him. “You’re not a horrible friend. You were hurt, and for good reason. You can’t blame yourself for any of this.” He rubbed small circles on her back. The rest of her sentence registered, and he asked, “Did you say you talked to Sirius about this?”

Lily laughed brokenly. “Yeah. Who would have thought, right? But he noticed I was upset, and he actually had some helpful advice. I guess he’s been dealing with something similar with his brother. He told me that sometimes people you care about make bad choices, but if you love them, you don’t give up on them. You stick by them and help them make the right ones.”

“Wow,” James said blankly. “That’s...surprisingly thoughtful for him.”

“Yeah, it was. It made me wonder if maybe I’ve been too harsh toward a lot of people.” She nudged him in the side. “You included.”

James shook his head. “I deserved everything and more. You don’t know about some of the shit I did to Severus, but...” He took a deep breath. “Well, it was really fucked up. Even if he forgives me, I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive myself.”

Lily studies him closely. “You should. Eventually. Living with that kind of guilt isn’t healthy.”

James smiled sadly and released her with one last squeeze on the shoulder. “I know.”

Lily was looking at him as if she’d never seen him before. “When did you get so mature, James Potter?”

He spared a thought for how his younger self have cheered at her words--proud to have finally earned her respect and wondering if he was close to getting into her pants. But he didn’t feel any of that now. Instead, he just felt old. Hoping to erase the unwanted feeling, he clutched at his chest in horror. “Me? Mature? How dare you utter such slander?”

Lily rolled her eyes, slowly recovering from the heavy emotions their conversation had drawn out of her. “I take it back. Honestly, though, I’m surprised. In a good way, for once.” She looked a bit repulsed at the thought.

James gave her a hopeful smile. “Does this mean you’ll talk to him? He’s in the Hospital Wing with a cold, and I’m sure he’d be happy to see you. Well, Severus-happy anyway.”

Lily laughed in understanding and cast a quick tempus. “Yes, I’ll talk to him, but I have to meet up with Alice about a Charms assignment in ten minutes. If he’s still in the Hospital Wing by this evening, I’ll just pop over to see him during dinner instead.” She lifted a brow when James made a face. “What is it, Potter? Is there something wrong with that time?”

James tried to cover his reaction with one of indifference. “No, it’s fine. I was planning on bringing him dinner like I usually do, but this is more important. I can wait outside until you’ve finished your happy reunion.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’ve been sneaking away from your friends to eat dinner with Severus?”

James flushed. “Well, not anymore. I mean, not the sneaking part. Remus and Peter know about it,

and I think Sirius does too. And I've just been bringing him food because he doesn't feed himself properly, and he's always so scrawny. You know he doesn't come to the Great Hall nearly enough, and when he does, he barely eats anything. It's not a big deal, Evans, really--"

Her eyes widened. "Oh my god."

"Whatever you're thinking--" James interrupted, feeling nervous all of a sudden.

"Are you two dating?"

"What? No, he hates me. He certainly doesn't feel *that* way about me."

Lily gave him a smug smile. "But you *want* to be dating," she corrected. "You fancy him." James dropped his gaze to stare at his shoes, clearing his throat awkwardly. When he finally glanced up, she was looking at him in wonder. "Holy Merlin, you're *in love* with him." She shook her head as if she couldn't quite believe it. "And just as I was starting to think--"

Her voice cut off, but James was already gaping. A slow grin crept across his face as horror filled Lily's features.

"James Potter, don't you dare--"

"You fancy me, Evans."

"I don't--"

"You finally gave into my charm and charisma."

"That's not what I was--"

"Don't worry, Evans. It's not your fault. Everyone does sooner or later."

"Potter!"

He ducked behind the door as she threw a hex his way, head sticking out so he could see the glorious fury on her face. "See you in the Hospital Wing tonight." He heard her scream in indignation behind the closed door as he made his way to the Hospital Wing with a smile on his lips.

When James reached the entrance, he peeked inside to make sure the coast was clear before sauntering over to Severus' hospital bed. It wouldn't do to have Pomfrey kick him out again. The chocolate would melt if it spent any more time in his pocket, and then he'd have to sneak into Honeydukes to thank Remus, which was more excitement than he was up for at the moment.

Severus was looking much better than earlier, and James could tell he'd taken a shower because his hair was a frizzy mess.

James felt his heart flutter at the sight. "No conditioner in the Hospital Wing showers?" James asked as he sat in the chair from earlier.

Severus scowled at him. "I'm ill, Potter. Must you mock me as well?"

James gave him a soft smile. "I'm not mocking. I think it's cute." Severus huffed but made no comment. "Can I touch it?" James asked, careful to make sure he had consent before stepping into the Slytherin's personal space. He couldn't risk another mistake like Friday night.

Severus eyed him cautiously but nodded. James reached out and trailed his fingers through the fluffy black frizz. Unable to stop himself, he let his hand travel deeper into Severus' hair, scratching his scalp lightly with his fingertips. Severus let his eyes fall shut as he pressed into the touch. James wanted to kiss his adorable face, but he refrained with much effort.

"Is it okay if we have company tonight at dinner?"

Severus' eyes snapped opened warily. "That depends. If it's Black and Pettigrew then certainly not."

James laughed, removing his hand with reluctance. "No, not them. How does Lily Evans sound?"

Severus' eyes widened, more hopeful than James had ever seen him. "Lily?"

"Yeah, Sev," James said, before coughing and correcting himself, "Severus. I talked to her, and she's ready to give you another chance."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "What did you say to her?"

James rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, it's sort of a blur actually. I might have yelled at her. A bit."

Severus looked scandalized but his pleasure at Lily's possible forgiveness apparently overrode any concern about James' methods. He was smiling softly, an expression he clearly wasn't accustomed to. His lips looked a bit like they were being controlled by a puppeteer, but James had never seen anything more perfect.

"James?" he said after a while. The Gryffindor was certain Severus was going to call him out for staring, but instead, he just said, "You can call me 'Sev' if you like."

James thought his heart might burst out of his chest. He leaned down and kissed him on the forehead, leaving the Slytherin blushing and scowling at once. "I'm going to pop in and check on Moony, but I'll see you tonight."

Before James could leave, Severus spoke, bringing him to a halt. "I haven't forgiven you." James turned to look at him. Sev's features twisted but James couldn't tell which emotions were present. "We didn't get to finish our conversation earlier because Madam Pomfrey interrupted, but I needed to say this." He stared at the spot where the wall met the floor. "I've been using Legilimency on you. I started teaching it to myself when I was eleven. I wanted to protect my mother, but I knew she wouldn't leave my father. Not when she had given up her family, her inheritance, everything for him. She was too proud to say she made a mistake. So I trained myself to read his thoughts, pick up on his different moods, so I could diffuse the situation or knock him unconscious before he hurt her. It didn't always work. Sometimes he sensed me picking through his thoughts and hit me. Sometimes even knowing what he was going to do wasn't enough to figure out how to stop him. But it helped. It gave me some sense of control."

James swallowed, unable to fathom the home life of which Severus spoke. He'd heard a hint of it that night in the rain, but his own guilt stole the brunt of his focus. Now, he felt a deep chill pulling at every aspect of his being.

"When I got my Hogwarts letter, my first thought was for my mother. I was afraid if I left her there alone with him, he'd kill her. But when I told her I didn't want to go, she said, 'Don't throw your life away for me. I can look after myself, but Hogwarts is your best chance at escaping all this. You'll be safe there.'" Severus' eyes were glistening at the memory. "I made myself a calendar on

some scrap paper and counted down the days until I would start at Hogwarts--until I would be away from him." He looked at James finally. "And then I got here, and you made my safe haven hell." The bitterness in his words made James' throat constrict, but it was the tears, falling in rivulets, that caused his heart to break. "I thought my father was the one who was fucked up, but then you treated me the same and I started to wonder if it was me. If I deserved it, for some reason, on account of being poor, or ugly, or a half-blood." James was crying now too, but the small part of him that wanted Severus to stop was overpowered by the larger part that wished the words were curses that would cut him to pieces.

"Some of the Slytherins took care of me out of obligation to their house or respect for my abilities, but Lily was the only person who genuinely seemed to think I was worth something. When I was with her, I didn't hate myself as much. I stopped believing there was something wrong with me, and instead, I started feeling angry with you. When I looked in your thoughts, I felt the same things I felt in my father's: anger, loathing, cruel satisfaction. I knew you were a monster, and no one else seemed to see it. It made me feel paranoid and crazy--" Severus cut off abruptly, coughing for so long James considered calling for Pomfrey. When he recovered, his eyes were glued to that wall-floor junction once again. "And then last year happened, and Lily left me too, and I felt certain my father was right--that you were right--and that I was mad for thinking I deserved anything better. Because I had hurt the one person who was kind to me with no ulterior motives."

"Sev--"

Severus cut him off with a look. "I don't believe that anymore. It took months, but I finally realized the reason Lily leaving hurt so much was that I knew I deserved it. And that made it easier to see I never deserved what you did to me. I hated you more than ever before after that--because I blamed you for everything. For ruining Hogwarts, for taking Lily away, for making me hate myself for so long. It was easy to hate you because it meant I didn't have to hate myself anymore." Severus took a deep breath. "And then you showed up at my table in the library." Sev's brows pinched, as if James was a particularly tough puzzle. "At first I figured if I just played along you'd eventually get bored and stop, or you'd pull your prank and be done with it. But you didn't pull a prank, and you didn't leave, and when I looked inside your head, I couldn't find any of the things I was expecting."

James wondered at the fact that he didn't feel violated at the thought of Severus reading his mind. After what he'd heard, he couldn't fault the Slytherin for not trusting him. He wasn't sure he'd fault Severus for casting the Cruciatus Curse on him. It might hurt less than what James was feeling right now. "What did you find?" James asked quietly.

Severus' lips twisted into a frown. "I'm not sure. It isn't something I recognize. But it's gotten stronger over the last few days."

James' heart broke at the implication of the words. *Love*, he wanted to tell Severus. *It's love*. But he couldn't make his mouth move--couldn't think about anything but the sad truth that Severus had never known what that felt like.

Severus cleared his throat again. "I think if I was anyone else, I wouldn't give you another chance. I want you to know that, so you know you don't deserve it."

"I know," James said hoarsely.

"But it's like you said: I don't have anything to lose. You can't hurt me any more than you already have. And if you think you can get Lily to forgive me...well, I'd do anything to have her back." Severus turned his gaze on James. "So you can have another chance. Not because you deserve one, but because I hope I do, and you're my best shot at getting one with Lily." Severus lifted a brow. "Are we clear?"

James nodded numbly. "Yeah, we're clear." He rubbed at his eyes to clear away the tears. "I know it doesn't matter because you don't trust me and you'll never forgive me, but I'm sorry. I didn't--" James let out a choked sound. "How can you even stand to look at me?" Severus didn't respond, so James just repeated weakly, "I'm so sorry."

"I'll see you tonight," Severus said in a clipped voice.

"Yeah." James sniffled, his tears having brought back the pesky cold symptom. He wanted to squeeze Sev's hand, but he refrained and stood to leave. A few paces from Sev's hospital bed, he paused. He knew it wasn't his place after everything he'd done, but he couldn't keep the question at bay any longer. "Sev, what was Lucius Malfoy doing here the other day?"

Severus paled but otherwise didn't react. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I know he was with you." When there was no response, James felt his heart sink. He knew his disappointment was obvious on his face because Severus couldn't meet his eyes. James sighed. "I'm not--I'm not going to turn you in to Dumbledore or anything. I just don't want to put Lily in danger, and if you're joining the Death Eaters..."

Severus clenched his fists around the bedsheets, still looking down. James thought he wasn't going to say anything at all, but finally, he whispered brokenly, "Please don't tell her not to come."

James swallowed hard but nodded once. "Later, Severus," he squeezed out. And with that, he made his way over to the back room of the Hospital Wing, trying to ignore the emotions swirling in his gut.

Chapter 11

James decided to branch out tonight and ask the house-elves for something other than sandwiches. When he mentioned Lily Evans would be there too, they scrambled off to prepare the meal with enthusiasm. Apparently, she was a friend of theirs. A few minutes later, they handed him a basket twice as large as the usual, which he promptly shrunk and slipped into his pocket. He checked the Map for sake of tradition before making his way to the Hospital Wing.

When he arrived, Lily was standing outside. As James watched her, he wondered if it was wrong to keep what he knew about Severus' involvement with the Death Eaters a secret. Then he reminded himself that she knew better than anyone--it was why she'd kept her distance for so long--and she had still decided to come here tonight. To help Severus. To save him from that. Which is what James would have to do too. He'd hoped he was wrong, but now that he knew the truth, he just had to listen to his own advice and help Severus make a better path.

"He doesn't bite," James said in Lily's ear.

"James!" she shrieked, slapping him on the shoulder. "I thought I wouldn't have to deal with your antics now that you swing for the other team, but apparently I was mistaken."

He grinned. "Aw, Evans. You know you'd miss my 'antics' if I just stopped cold turkey. I have to ease off slowly so you don't go through withdrawal." He placed his hands on her shoulders and steered her toward the door. "Now, hurry up and forgive each other so I can dash in with my good looks and fancy food and sweep him off his feet."

"How romantic," she giggled, slipping through the door with considerably less tension in her features. James leaned against the wall, preparing to give them their space, but seconds later, Lily was back.

"Sev heard my shriek when you scared me half to death and demanded I bring you inside. So bossy, that one." She looped her arm through James' and dragged him through the doors.

Severus was sitting upright, propped up by several pillows, and his hair had slumped to a more acceptable level of frizziness. There was a tension in his shoulders but James noticed it lessened when Sev spotted him.

"You found me," he said, not even feigning surprise.

"It was truly a challenge--probably your best hiding spot yet." James set the basket down on a cart and started to remove its contents. "As per your suggestion, I brought something other than sandwiches this time."

“Does he do everything you tell him to?” Lily asked Sev teasingly.

“Oh, yes,” Severus drawled. “I have him wrapped around my little finger. Any requests you’d like me to pass along?”

“Don’t abuse your privileges, Sev, or I might take them back,” James threatened. “Shall I go ask the house-elves to make sandwiches instead?”

Severus didn’t answer. Instead, he was focused on Lily, who was likewise focused on him. James turned back to the food to give them space. The house-elves had really outdone themselves. They packed smaller portions of the selection in the Great Hall into a rolled up tablecloth that, when unrolled, produced the food in impeccable condition--no dishes spilled or broken. James hummed to himself to cover up the quiet reunion behind him and served himself a plate. The whispers were still going when he finished so he made a plate for Sev as well. He ignored the indignation stirring inside him on behalf of his species and placed meat and cheese items next to the vegetables.

“You can stop humming, James,” Lily said finally. “We’re friends again.”

James spun toward them theatrically and presented Severus with his plate. “Your dinner, my good sir.”

Lily snorted. “Whatever happened to ladies first?”

James let out a horrified gasp. “Lily, Severus is ill! An invalid! His needs come before ours. You know that.”

Severus took the plate with a glare. “It’s just a cold, Potter.”

“Nonsense,” James tutted, sounding a bit like Madam Pomfrey. “I will dote on you hand and foot until you’re up and about again.”

Lily returned with a plate of food. “Who knew befriending Potter meant getting a free butler?”

“Oi!” James protested.

Severus smiled. “I missed you, Lily.” The two shared an affectionate look, and while it was at his expense, James couldn’t help but feel happy to see their connection had survived the several month lapse.

“So,” Lily said. “Tell me how this happened.” She gestured between the two of them with her fork.

Severus looked to James to explain, but James shook his head. “You tell it. I want to hear your side of the story.”

Severus chewed and swallowed. “It’s not particularly exciting. This prat over here decided to interrupt my reading so he could apologize for his poor behavior for the last six years. I was certain it was a prank and told him so repeatedly until he got annoyed and left. I finished my reading in peace and slept soundly, assuming the affair to be over and done with, but I was sorely mistaken. Apparently, Potter gave up on apologizing after his first attempt went awry and decided instead to attach himself to me like a barnacle until he irritated me into indifference. That brings us to today.”

When he finished, James was spluttering in indignation and Lily was laughing so hard she couldn’t breathe.

Severus lifted a brow. "If you wanted it told your way, you shouldn't have made me do it."

James shook his head, turning to Lily sadly. "I'm so sorry you were given such a dry and sarcastic rendition. Mine would have been hyperbolic and swoon-worthy, filled with heroics, drama, and romance." James stabbed a piece of lettuce for effect. "Now, I want to hear about how you two met."

After chatting with Sev and Lily in the Hospital Wing for a couple of hours and paying a quick visit to Moony with another gift of chocolate, James joined the other two Marauders in a secluded corner in the library to work out the remaining details for their Christmas prank.

"Prongs, mate, it worked!" Sirius said in greeting.

"What did?"

"Your plot to get Lily by befriending Snivellus, of course." Sirius shook his head admiringly. "I didn't think you had such conniving in you, but I saw the three of you in the Hospital Wing, and there wasn't a single hex thrown."

James laughed, sharing a look with Wormtail. "Padfoot, you're still on the wrong track. Let me know when you figure it out for real."

Peter made a horrified face. "When he figures it out for real, everyone at Hogwarts will know."

James cackled, surprised at how the inevitable death of his reputation didn't bother him all that much. "Right you are, Wormtail. Padfoot, mate, you're going to be *pissed* when it hits you. Try not to hex any first years in your rage."

Sirius looked between his friends with suspicion. "Whatever you lot are talking about, I don't want to know. Right now, I'm just going to be happy that my best mate is on speaking terms with the girl he's been trying to get since third year."

"Well, that's still technically true, I guess," James said with a shrug. "Also, Lily told me you talked to her about Severus, and I just wanted to say thanks."

Sirius gave him a pat on the back. "I may not know what you're plotting, but when Evans said you were trying to convince her to forgive the little git, I figured I could play my part. I trust you know what you're doing."

James tossed an arm over his shoulder in a one-sided embrace. "Thanks, mate. Now, where are we at with this spellwork?"

Sirius steered them around the table to give James access to their notes and diagrams. They had sketched them on a blank page in Peter's History of Magic textbook. "We've figured out how to put the spell on a timer so everyone's is activated at once," Sirius told him, "but we haven't worked in the counter-curse part yet. We wanted to use Moony's idea to make it so it kicks in automatically once everyone is connected, but we haven't found any spells to do that."

"We're also thinking we'll just charm everyone because it'll add more chaos," Peter chimed in helpfully.

James grinned. "Brilliant." And with that, the three dove into the tomes before them, making notes and discussing options when necessary.

They spent the next week in the library during almost all of their spare time. James still got dinner with Severus every night, but he couldn't stay until curfew as he'd done previously. He was grateful every time Severus agreed to continue their nightly tradition because he was worried Sev would dismiss him now that Lily was back in his life. He didn't though, and James didn't let himself think too much about the 'why'. It wouldn't do to get his hopes up for no reason.

Lily joined them one evening, and James was surprisingly glad to have her there--even if it meant experiencing vague pangs of jealousy when he saw the glances they shared and the look in Sev's eyes when he talked about their childhood memories. Although at times the Slytherin was easy to read with his blushes and scowls, other times his tone and stoicism hid everything away. It was the first time in James' life he genuinely couldn't tell if someone was interested in him. With Lily, it was always fairly clear that she was attracted to him but disgusted by his personality (or lack thereof, as she'd told him on occasion), but with Severus, it was a mystery.

James figured Severus must be aware that James felt something for him since he had never exactly been subtle. Then again, Severus' self-consciousness and lack of experience with people caring about him might make him less likely to pick up on the signs. After all, he'd thought mere attempts at friendship were a prank. What would he make of James' desire to be something more?

James was feeling better about the whole thing now that Lily, Remus, and Peter knew. It gave him hope that he wouldn't be an outcast if something did happen between him and Severus, even if the rest of the school no longer thought the world of James Potter. Turning Padfoot's lack of knowledge into a game had also helped ease tensions somewhat. It made it feel less life-changing, less threatening, less real. When James let himself think about it, however, he was terrified of how Sirius would react.

Even in his lovestruck haze, James was aware that Severus Snape was still the ugly, strange, Dark Arts-obsessed weirdo they had bullied for years. James loved those things about him--so much it hurt sometimes--but for Sirius, nothing had changed. Remus had never been involved in their bullying--although he hadn't stopped them either--and Peter had been no more than a cheerleader for their taunts, but James and Sirius shaped much of their school career around teasing and pranking others, and Severus was their favorite victim. The thought repulsed him now, but he wasn't sure if the same was true for Sirius. He could only hope Remus was right when he said Padfoot's love for him was stronger than his hatred for Snape. The fact that Sirius had talked to Lily in Sev's favor gave James hope that Sirius had at least grown up a little in the last year.

After turning his mind in circles over potential outcomes of a relationship between him and Severus, James was met each time with the reminder that there was nothing to consider until he knew if Severus liked him back. For anything to happen, James would actually have to do or say something to make his intentions clear. And James had no idea how to do that.

Sure, he'd asked Lily out publicly more times than anyone could count, but James had never cared about someone so intimately before or been so afraid of rejection--and he couldn't even use the tactics he'd practiced with Lily. Severus would hex his balls off if James catcalled him in front of other students (not that that had worked with Lily either, admittedly) and if James approached him backed by the other Marauders to offer him a compliment, Severus would panic and break down right then and there--or perhaps use the safe word. And that wasn't exactly a great start to the romantic speech James would then present.

Even if he asked Severus out in private, the Slytherin would no doubt think it was a joke or a taunt, and he'd say no whether he wanted to or not, simply out of self-preservation. Which left only one

option: James had to tell Severus how he felt. There couldn't be any teasing or pick-up lines or dramatic speeches because Severus wouldn't believe them, and James couldn't afford to put Sev on edge before he'd gotten around to telling him the truth. The confession would have to be earnest and intimate--neither of which were descriptors James had ever applied to himself in any context, especially where romance was involved.

Whenever this knowledge made him freeze up with fear, however, he reminded himself that he owed it to Severus to be honest. After everything he had done, James wouldn't fault Severus for never trusting him--he hoped that wouldn't be the case, but he certainly wouldn't blame him. James knew it was a long shot that Severus liked boys, let alone that he liked him. Even if Severus *did* like him, James was fairly certain he didn't like him enough to put James' mistakes behind them. But the thought of what could be was enough to make rejection bearable.

There was a part of James that, even if it was unrequited, wanted Severus to know how deeply and completely he was loved. Wanted him to know he was worthy of the kind of love that changed destinies. Wanted him to be able to name the feeling he found when he looked inside James' mind. When James thought about it like that, he knew he could do it. It was just a matter of finding the right time.

Before he could do any confessing, however, he needed to find a way to build Severus' trust so that, at the very least, Sev believed he was telling the truth. James brainstormed ideas as he sat through his classes and stared up at his ceiling that night. When he finally settled on one, he grabbed his invisibility cloak and snuck out of his dormitory to collect what he needed.

When James neared the dungeons, he pulled out the Marauder's Map to check Slughorn's location. He knew exactly what he was looking for, so he only needed Slughorn to be out of the way for a few minutes. It wasn't his first time breaking into his professor's personal potion collection. James stopped in his tracks when he spotted the name *Horace Slughorn* in his office next to the name *Lucius Malfoy*.

Moving as quickly and quietly as he could, James hurried to Slughorn's door and pressed his ear against it. He could tell they were talking, but the wood was too thick to hear the words. After several minutes, the voices got closer, and James threw himself out of the way only a second before the door was flung wide open.

"...good to see you again," Slughorn said. "I must admit, I didn't expect you to be back so soon. You were here just last week, were you not?"

James held his breath. He was sprawled on the stone floor in an uncomfortable position, and the tip of his shoe was exposed, but he didn't dare move for fear of drawing attention to himself.

Malfoy's eyes flicked in James' direction, but his expression didn't change. "I enjoyed our last talk so thoroughly. It seemed unnecessary to wait another six months for a repeat."

Slughorn puffed out his chest to the point where James wondered if he'd been hit by an engorgement charm. "Well, I can't say I mind. Tea with one of my favorite former students is certainly a welcome imposition."

Malfoy smiled thinly. "I'll let you get back to your work. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Certainly, certainly. I hope I'll see you again soon."

"Indeed." This time Malfoy's smile revealed teeth, glowing white in the dim light. "Goodnight."

"Take care." Slughorn closed his door, and James heard the subtle click of the lock.

Straightening his robes with a precise motion, Malfoy started down the hallway. Just when James thought he was in the clear, the blond spun toward him and whipped off his invisibility cloak.

"Potter. Surely eavesdropping is beneath even you." He lifted a brow. "Then again, with the company you keep, perhaps nothing is beneath you. What a waste of a bloodline."

James drew his wand and jumped to his feet before Malfoy could stun him or cast a curse. "Don't you have better things to do than spend your evenings here, Malfoy? I guess it's hard being out in the real world where no one kisses your boots or worships the ground you walk on. It must be terrible to know you peaked at Hogwarts, especially when you weren't all that impressive while you were here."

Malfoy smirked at him. "Just you wait. It's only a matter of time before the 'real world' wisens up and gives respect where respect is due. You'll be cowering at my feet soon enough."

"You're wrong, Malfoy," James said, stepping in close. "I'm not afraid of you. You and the rest of the Death Eaters are weak. You'll lose the war, and you'll get the punishment you deserve. But if you think I'm going to let you drag people I care about down with you, you're wrong."

Malfoy backed him into a wall, digging his wand into the flesh of James' throat. "Your Gryffindor naivety is amusing, Potter, but make no mistake. We are stronger than you, more powerful than you, and more numerous than you can possibly imagine. You may have reckless bravery on your side, but every other advantage is ours." He smirked. "You're on the Quidditch team. I don't have to explain to you how much harder it is to win when your opponent doesn't play by the rules."

James struggled to breathe with the tip of Malfoy's wand pressing into him, but he managed to say, "Severus won't join you. He's stronger than you'll ever be, and it's only a matter of time before he realizes it."

Malfoy laughed, and the sound made James go cold all over. "You're just afraid of what he'll do to you when he claims the power the Dark Lord has to offer. You and your little friends may pose a challenge when it's four against one and the professors are watching, but out in the 'real world', you don't stand a chance." He traced his wand over James' throat and mouthed 'crucio' with a taunting glint in his eyes. When James flinched, he laughed again. "Severus is powerful, you're right about that, but he's a Slytherin, and he knows where his loyalties lie. You'd do best to stay out of his way."

And with that, Malfoy released him and strode off down the hall, boots clicking against the stone. James took gulping breaths until his heart stopped racing. After hearing Malfoy's speech, James' quest seemed more important than ever, but his nerves were shot, and he knew he'd have better luck tomorrow. Gathering his invisibility cloak, he headed back to Gryffindor. His fingers itched for the Map, but he didn't think he could stomach the sight of Malfoy's name next to Sev's, or Regulus'. James squeezed his hands into fists and walked the rest of the way with his eyes locked straight ahead.

Chapter 12

The next day, James accidentally found himself outside of Dumbledore's office for a second time. He retraced his steps from the week before and slumped in a chair without speaking.

Dumbledore looked up at him through his spectacles. "Mr. Potter. What brings you to my office on this fine morning?"

James stared at his hands. He hadn't planned on coming here, so he didn't know how to start. Lifting his head, he asked, "Why are you letting Lucius Malfoy into Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore seemed amused at the question. James kind of wanted to punch him. "He was a student here, as I'm sure you recall, and he is now a respected member of society. Professor Slughorn invited him for tea, and I saw no reason to refuse him."

"But he's a Death Eater!"

"Do you have any proof?"

James spluttered. Dumbledore had proven repeatedly that he knew about everything that went on in this castle. How had he missed something so important? "He practically confessed to my face. You know, while he was holding a wand to my throat," James said angrily.

"I'm fairly certain I don't know what you're referring to." Dumbledore smiled. "You have to forgive me, my mind isn't what it used to be."

James growled, tugging at his hair. "I just don't understand. You asked me to help Severus make the right choice, but you keep letting Death Eaters into the school."

Dumbledore's gaze cleared, and he leaned forward, fingers steepled on his desk. "The most important part is that it is a choice. Mr. Snape is a talented young man, and he could be very advantageous to whichever side he picks in this war. I cannot trust him, however, until he is faced with darkness and chooses to turn away from it. Otherwise, he may be tempted to switch sides at a time when such a betrayal could cost us everything."

James stared at him, disbelieving. "You've been orchestrating this? Sev's not even of age yet--and Regulus is even younger. How could you force them to make a choice like that?"

"Age does not exempt us from--"

"They deserve better than this," James interrupted. He didn't want to hear any more cryptic maxims. He wanted to scream. "You'd never treat a Gryffindor like that." When Dumbledore

remained silent, James stood, unable to think of anything to say that didn't involve swearing at him. Finally, he said, "If either of them joins the Death Eaters, it'll be on you."

James didn't wait for a response this time. He left.

By evening, James' anger had melted into determination. If Dumbledore wanted to bring the war to Hogwarts, then James would just have to fight. It was horrific to imagine the Headmaster allowing Death Eaters into the school, but he wouldn't have done it if he didn't think Sev could be swayed toward the light. It was up to James to fix the damage Dumbledore had caused. It pained him to know that the only course of action was to follow Dumbledore's twisted plan, but he tried not to think about it too hard. What other option did he have but to continue what he'd started and help Severus?

James found Sev in yet another classroom in the dungeons. While James had spent a ridiculous amount of time measuring each hallway and room in the castle to make the Marauder's Map, he was still surprised each time Severus managed to pick a new one.

Sev had brought the food tonight, so James grabbed a blanket and some pillows from his dormitory instead of making his nightly trip to the kitchens. Now, however, he was deeply regretting that decision. Sev just looked so damn *cozy*. He was snugly tucked into the pile of pillows and practically swimming in his frumpy hand-knit sweater. The sweater was a non-color as if it had been washed too many times and the dyes had faded away, but it wasn't black like Sev's robes, so it contrasted nicely with his dark hair and eyes. He was so cuddleable it hurt. James thought he might die if he stared for a minute longer, so he drew his attention to the food Severus was unpacking.

"No sandwiches?" he teased.

Severus snorted. "Certainly not. We've both had enough of those to last a lifetime."

James peered at the food skeptically. "And is it--"

"Don't worry, Potter. No animals were harmed in the making of your dinner."

James gaped. "There's so much variety! How did you manage to get all this?"

Severus smirked at him. "I found a vegan cookbook in the library and made some suggestions to the house-elves."

James stared in awe at the thoughtfulness of the gesture. He didn't know how to convey the rush of emotions he was feeling without giving himself away, so he settled for a smile and a quiet, "Thanks, Severus."

Sev ducked his face behind his hair and served himself a plate. "It wasn't difficult. I don't know why you didn't do so earlier."

James grinned at the way Severus brushed off his gratitude before digging into the food. "Holy Merlin, this is amazing," James said around a mouthful.

"Swallow before speaking."

"I've never tasted such deliciousness," James continued, ignoring Sev's reprimand. "You're my hero. My knight in shining armor, dashing in on a valiant hippogriff with a buffet full of mouth-

watering vegan cuisine.”

Severus lifted his brows. “That makes you the damsel in distress.”

“A role I am more than content to play, unlike a certain sourpuss I happen to know.” James swooned dramatically so he was resting on a pillow next to Severus’ hip with his hand across his forehead. “Save me, dear prince, from the mediocrity of sad sandwiches.” Severus retained his stoic countenance, so James swooned again, this time landing his head in Severus’ lap. “Take me away to your castle where your servants can hand-feed me vegan delicacies and then you can ravish me in the night.”

Sev’s eyes widened, and he shoved James’ head away like it was a spider. “Forget I said anything.”

James laughed and reluctantly pulled himself into a seated position. “For real though, this is incredible. Thank you.”

James took pity on Severus and finished his meal in silence. The minute he was finished, however, he brushed his hands together and said, “Alright, so I was thinking we could play a game.”

Severus sent him a wary look with which James was now quite familiar. “I’m almost certain my answer will be ‘no’.”

James shook his head. “I think you’ll like this one. So I was thinking about how you use Legilimency on me because you don’t trust me.” Severus looked like he was about to speak, but James continued before he could. “And weirdly enough, I actually don’t mind that. But I want you to be able to trust me without having to constantly run everything I say through a lie detector.”

Severus pursed his lips. “How do you expect to achieve that?”

James fished around in his pocket for the other thing he’d brought. A tiny vial of Veritaserum. James had gone back and swiped it from Slughorn’s stock during lunch. He’d spotted the bottle when he was looking for Polyjuice a few months back, so he’d known it would be there. Sev looked even more disturbed. “So the game, if you can really call it that, is that you get to ask me anything you want until the Veritaserum wears off, and in exchange, you stop using Legilimency on me all the time.”

Severus frowned. “How on earth does that make any sense?”

James rolled his eyes. “Because this way you’ll be clear on anything you want to know regarding my intentions or anything else, and moving forward, you can stop doubting everything that comes out of my mouth.”

“How will you know if I keep using Legilimency on you?”

James shrugged. “Like I said, it really doesn’t bother me. I just think whatever non-friendship thing we’re doing would be a lot healthier if you weren’t having to magically affirm my actions all the time. And since I won’t know if you keep your end of the bargain, you don’t really have anything to lose. It’s a free chance to ask me anything you want and get the honest truth, no strings attached. Asking me questions I have to respond to honestly will be a lot quicker and more reliable than interpreting my thoughts using Legilimency anyway.”

Severus stared at him for a long time. “It’s rather conceited of you to assume I want to learn more about you.”

James smirked. "I know. But I'm not wrong, am I?" When Severus failed to hide the curiosity in his gaze, James uncorked the vial and downed a dose of the liquid.

"Veritaserum can be resisted," Severus pointed out.

James snorted. "Sure, if you're a master at Occlumency, but I've proved repeatedly that I'm not." He gestured for Severus to start. "Whenever you're ready, my prince."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Are you still keeping up the damsel in distress act, or are you aware that Prince is my mother's name?"

James smiled a dorky smile. "I didn't know that was your mother's name. I just like the idea of you being my prince." Merlin, this was a terrible idea. James had intended this as a precursor to confessing his feelings so Severus would trust he was telling the truth. He hadn't considered the fact that he might make it obvious when he no longer had any remnant of a filter.

Severus looked puzzled at the reply, but he nodded. He didn't seem to know what to ask next.

James huffed good-naturedly. "Come on, Sev. Ask me anything. There are obviously some things you're wondering about if you have to resort to digging through my head all the time. My favorite color. Why Wednesday is my favorite day of the week." He faltered a bit, knowing he should give permission to ask more serious topics but afraid of what he might say. "Whether or not this has all been a prank."

Severus eyed him carefully, tension evident in the set of his shoulders. "When you approached me in the library that first day, did you really intend to apologize?"

"Yes," James said.

"You weren't trying to prank me?"

"Nope."

"And now," Severus continued, "you aren't planning any pranks?"

James tried to say 'no', but the word caught in his mouth. Instead, he said, "Well, I am planning a prank, but it's not directed toward you."

Sev's lip curled, but he was more relaxed than James had ever seen him, besides when he was asleep in the Hospital Wing. "I don't think I want to know," Sev said. James smiled innocently at him, pleased at how well this was going so far. "What made you...turn over a new leaf?" Severus doused the idiom in heavy sarcasm.

James tried to pause to collect his thoughts into a coherent answer, but the words were already spilling out of his mouth. "I felt guilty for what I'd done to you. I think I used to believe you weren't really human, like you were evil incarnate or something. But then I saw how broken you were, and how you stopped eating in the Great Hall, and how you were nearly always alone, and I wanted to fix what I'd done."

Sev looked conflicted when James finished, but he quickly cleared all expression from his face. He glanced down at his plate before asking the next question so his hair hid his features. "Why were you spying on Lucius Malfoy last night?"

James blinked. "He told you about that?"

Severus shook his head. "I saw you. I was--" He met James' eyes. "I was going to meet him." He looked like he was daring James to comment on that. He didn't. "What were you doing there?"

James tossed him the Veritaserum vial. "I was on my way to steal this. He just happened to get in my way." James paled. "Shit, I didn't get you in trouble or anything, did I? I didn't even think about that. If Malfoy thinks you're friends with a 'blood traitor' like me--"

"I fixed it," Severus said easily. "He knows I care about Lily, so I told him she's been sending you to 'save' me from the darkness."

James nodded, trying not to be bothered by the fact that Severus was still trying to maintain appearances for the Death Eaters. It made it more likely that Sev would choose them in the end--like he was already trying to explain away whatever James was to him. "Well, I'm sorry for leaving you a mess to clean up either way. I just couldn't stand hearing him talk like that."

Severus frowned as if he was unsure if he wanted to continue or change the subject. "You told him I wouldn't join him, even though you must know I'm considering it. Why?"

James shrugged half-heartedly. His stomach twisted at how casually Sev could discuss becoming a Death Eater. "Wishful thinking?"

Sev pursed his lips. He poked at his plate of food for a few seconds but didn't take a bite. "You said I was stronger than him."

James tilted his head. "That wasn't a question."

Severus opened his mouth as if to speak but shook his head instead. He drummed his long fingers on a pillow in thought. "How do you always know where to find me?"

James was glad for the change in topic, but he hoped the Marauders forgave him for this one. "Sirius, Remus, Peter, and I created a map of all of Hogwarts that shows where everyone is at all times."

Severus gaped. "You...what?" James shrugged. "That's..." Severus made several incoherent sounds. "That's really advanced magic."

James grinned. "Does that impress you?" He received only a glare in response. "Next question."

Severus shifted uncomfortably as he chewed on his next words. "Why are you so...tactile all the time?"

James laughed nervously, hoping he could answer without being too obvious. "What can I say? I like touching you. I like the way you're surprised at first, like you're not sure what to do with me, but then you relax into it and allow yourself to enjoy it. I know you probably haven't had much experience with people touching you in a positive way, and I think that's unfair because you deserve things like hugs and hand-holding and forehead kisses."

Severus was blushing bright red by the time James finished, and he cleared his throat awkwardly. "You really are a sap, Potter."

"Only for you, my dear prince." Salazar, this was James' worst idea ever. If Severus didn't know he was head over heels for him by now, he was more oblivious than Padfoot.

Sev's lip twitched. "You're really sticking with the pet name?"

“Oh, most definitely.”

The Slytherin tilted his head to the side. “You have a nickname--that one Black, Lupin, and Pettigrew call you. Prongs, is it?”

“Yes,” James answered, hoping that was the end of that particular line of questioning.

“Why did they pick that ridiculous name?”

James pressed his lips together tightly. When he’d come up with this plan, he’d briefly run through a list of secrets that shouldn’t be shared. Severus already knew about Moony, and James had figured his status as an Animagus wouldn’t come up naturally. Clearly, he was wrong. Severus was studying him with more and more interest the longer he kept his mouth closed. Finally, the pressure became too much, and James blurted, “I’m an unregistered Animagus.” He slumped when the words left him. “I turn into a stag, so, Prongs,” he finished lamely.

Severus paled, eyes wide. “What did you just say?”

“I’m an unregistered Animagus?”

“No, the other thing.”

“I turn into a stag. You know, like a deer?”

Severus stood suddenly, causing his plate to fall to the ground and shatter. “I have to go.”

“What?” James said, confusion and panic vying for prominence in his head. “Why?”

“I just remembered I’m supposed to meet Lily in the library to work on a project,” he said dismissively, pulling his bag over his shoulder.

“Sev, that’s obviously a lie.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation,” he snapped.

“I just told you about something I did that’s incredibly illegal, and now you’re running off with bad excuses, so pardon me if I’m a little concerned,” James said in return, tugging at his collar in frustration.

Severus wasn’t listening, however. He looked like he was trying to process a terminal diagnosis, and before James could capture his attention, he walked out the door.

James stared at the mess of pillows and dishes around him in bewilderment. He wanted to believe Severus wouldn’t just turn him in with no provocation, but he didn’t know what to make of the events that had just transpired. For a moment, he considered throwing on his invisibility cloak and following him. But then he remembered tonight was supposed to be about building trust, so he settled for pulling out the Marauder’s Map. When Severus went to the library instead of Dumbledore’s office, James let out a sigh of relief. Although he didn’t really believe it, he let himself imagine Severus was actually doing a project with Lily. He repeated that to himself until his heart stopped racing, and then he packed away the food, blankets, and shards of china and headed to Gryffindor Tower.

Days went by, and no one came to cart James off to Azkaban. Neither James nor Severus brought

up the outburst when they met for dinner the next night, or the night after that, and James began to wonder if maybe he'd dreamt the whole evening. The only thing that kept him from settling on this explanation, however, was the fact that Severus had been...different since then. He was more trusting, like the questions under Veritaserum had eased his anxiety, but he also shut down when James touched him or flirted with him. Which wouldn't have been weird if Severus had gotten up and left during his lengthy 'tactile' monologue. But that wasn't the case. He'd left when he found out James could illegally transfigure himself into a deer, and James couldn't figure out why that would make Severus uncomfortable around him. Unless he had an intense fear of antlers?

Whatever the reason, Severus hadn't turned him in, so James decided to forget about it as best he could. The more time went by, the more James was convinced the odd behavior had all been in his head. He turned his focus back to finding the right time to confess his feelings. Severus had to have a clue by now, but James wouldn't feel at ease until he told him officially. It was getting more and more difficult to keep it a secret, but more importantly, he really didn't want to anymore.

Chapter 13

James bounced his knee impatiently as he waited for Transfiguration to end. The Christmas prank was in three days, and James decided it was finally time to tell Severus how he felt. He was certain McGonagall knew somehow and was slowing downtime just to mess with him. Sure, it *sounded* impossible, but that had never stopped the woman before.

When she finally released them, James gathered his things and sauntered over to lean against Sev's desk.

"Hey," he said as casually as he could manage.

Severus raised a brow. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Do you have a sec? There's something I wanted to talk to you about." If James hadn't spent a ridiculous amount of time staring at the Slytherin and learning his mannerisms, he wouldn't have noticed the way Severus subtly tensed. "It's nothing bad," James reassured. Then, as an afterthought, "I hope."

Severus nodded once and left the classroom, expecting James to follow. They were the last out of the classroom so it was easy to slip into an empty room across the hall undetected. Once inside, Severus crossed his arms and looked at him.

James took a shaky breath. "Okay, so I don't really know how to start. Um, give me a second." The Slytherin smirked at him, and James made a face, but there wasn't any heat behind it.

"Should I come back later?" Severus deadpanned.

"Shut up and let me think, you prat," James said. This wasn't going the way he had planned. Not that he had planned it out. *Obviously*, Severus would say in response. "Okay, so you know a while back when you asked about Lily, and I said I wasn't really into her anymore?"

Severus wasn't looking at him. "Let me guess: you've changed your mind and decided Lily is your one true love."

James couldn't help but laugh. "No, not even close. Let me finish, would you?" Severus was eyeing him carefully again, and James decided that was a good sign, so he continued with less trepidation. "So then I mentioned I had my eye on someone else, and when you asked about it, I told you I didn't think we were ready to have that conversation."

"I seem to recall you saying you'd talk about it when I deemed you worthy of the term 'friend'." There was barely contained mirth in Severus' eyes. "Is that what this is about? You're wondering if we're officially friends yet?"

James groaned in frustration. "Merlin, you are insufferable. It's like you're trying to make this harder for me on purpose."

Severus shrugged slyly. "I do like watching you get all worked up."

James tore at his hair with his hands. "Okay, just--I'm going to say this now before you interrupt me and get me off track again and I dramatically storm off in frustration. The reason I wasn't ready to talk about it yet is that the someone else is you."

Severus went deathly still. "What?"

James fidgeted with the strap of his bag, unable to look at him. "I like you, Severus. A lot. Okay, more than like. And I know you probably don't feel the same, especially since you just reminded me that I haven't even been upgraded to 'friend' yet, let alone 'more than friends', but I thought you should know."

"That's ridiculous," Severus said. Neither his face nor his voice gave away his emotions.

James wished Sev would glare at him, snicker, do anything other than stare stoically at him as he poured his heart out. "Maybe," he granted, "but that doesn't mean it isn't true."

"Did you hit your head?"

"No, I didn't bloody hit my head. Why are you making this so difficult?"

Severus gestured uselessly, bewilderment finally breaking through his icy facade. "Because you're James Potter! You're supposed to snog girls and hate Slytherins and eventually marry Lily against her better judgment."

"Oh, have you been reading a guide?" James retorted irritably. "You should lend it to me so I can make a few corrections and send them to the publisher."

Severus was still pale, and he looked like he was starting to shake. "This is some sort of joke."

"No, it's not--"

"Somehow you must have found out about--" Severus cut himself off, looking afraid of whatever he almost said. "And now you're pulling some sort of prank."

"Found out about what?" James asked before shaking his head to clear it. "Look, this isn't a prank. I've been trying to figure out a way to tell you for weeks."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because--" James opened and closed his mouth several times before exhaling heavily. "I don't know." If Severus still didn't trust him, James was naive to try to make this work. Severus deserved to be with someone he didn't have to doubt. Someone who could offer comfort and safety. Someone like Lily. James felt his throat constrict. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out. Remus, Peter, and Lily all figured it out on their own, so I thought you might have too. Clearly, I was wrong. Can we just pretend I never said anything?" He looked away, trying to blink the moisture from his eyes.

“You’ve talked to Lily about this?” Sev’s tone still gave nothing away, but James didn’t dare look at him to study his expression.

He made a horrible sound that was meant to be a laugh. He wondered if one could unlearn laughter. “Yeah. The day I asked her to give you a second chance.” James tried to roll his eyes, but they ached with restrained tears and his breath grew short. “Apparently when I talk about you, I’m kind of obvious. I sort of figured the hugs and forehead kisses and hand-holding might have given it away as well--” James stopped talking when he realized Severus had moved closer. He glanced up to see Sev’s face only a foot away. There was an unreadable expression in the Slytherin’s eyes, but he wasn’t running away or hexing him so maybe all hope wasn’t lost.

“Why should I believe you?” Severus repeated, but this time there was an intensity in his eyes that said he was begging James to give him the right answer.

“Because you’ve seen it,” James said softly. “When you looked inside my mind.”

“I haven’t done that in a while,” Severus admitted slowly. “Even before the Veritaserum.”

James stared at him with something like desperation. “Do it now.”

Sev’s eyes flicked between his as he tried to determine if James was serious. Apparently coming to a decision, Severus whispered the incantation. James felt a presence enter his mind, softly and then with force, since Sev had no reason to be subtle. He sifted through James’ thoughts like a dying man digging for a single drop of water, and James tried not to flinch away from the sensation as images flashed before his mind. The first perfect smirk Sev had given him. The way Severus clutched at James as he cried in his arms. James holding Sev’s hand for a brief few moments. Severus blushing James’ favorite shade of pink. James brushing Sev’s sweat-drenched hair from his face. James kissing his forehead. James kissing his hand. Severus swimming in that perfectly worn sweater. Severus trying not to smile. Severus smiling. Throughout all of them, there was a pervading warmth and fullness and exhilaration that was nearly all-consuming in such a concentrated dose.

And then the presence was gone, and Severus was staring at him like he was seeing him for the first time. “I don’t understand. I’ve never felt anything like that in someone’s thoughts before.”

“Nothing even similar? In Lily’s mind? Or your mother’s?”

“I’ve never used Legilimency on Lily,” Severus said. “And the main thing my mother feels toward me is guilt, which isn’t what’s in your head. Just tell me, Potter.”

“Love,” James managed, nearly swallowing the word as the emotions inside him threatened to spill over the brim.

Severus’ eyes widened, and he stumbled back. “I--I don’t--”

James felt his heart shudder in his chest, and he looked away. He needed to keep from breaking down, at least until Severus left. “You don’t feel the same. I understand. It was a longshot anyway.”

“I have to go,” Sev said.

“Yeah,” James croaked. “Okay.” There was a scurry of feet, less graceful than James had ever heard him. When he looked up, Severus was gone.

The weirdest part was that James didn't even mope afterward. It felt sort of inevitable that Severus would say no, and while he wished that hadn't been the case, he wasn't surprised. Instead, he mostly felt restless, because he didn't know if Severus would talk to him again, or if things would be awkward between them, or if he'd messed up whatever non-friendship they'd had.

Remus eyed James as if he knew something was up, but no one else seemed to think anything was wrong. James laughed at jokes and took notes in class and chatted with Padfoot and Wormtail. And really, nothing *was* wrong. He had wanted Severus to know the truth, and now he did. That was that.

And yes, maybe it hadn't quite sunken in yet that the person James was confident he would love for the rest of his life didn't love him back. But there was nothing to be done about it, and it wasn't like James could fault Sev for not getting warm and fuzzy feelings for the person responsible for the worst moments of his life.

Maybe James would mope later, but for now, he just kept repeating this new truth in his head like a particularly difficult-to-remember history fact: Severus didn't feel that way about him. He tried accentuating different parts of the sentence to see if certain versions made a bigger impact.

Severus didn't *feel* that way about him.

Severus didn't feel *that* way about him.

Severus didn't feel that way about *him*.

No matter how he said it, it didn't feel real. Writing it down didn't help, and after a while, the words started to lose their meaning. James wondered if Sirius had inherited one of those blood quills--that way he could at least make the words sink in physically. He wasn't sure how he could ask for one without raising questions, however, and once it did sink in, he didn't think he'd want something so depressing engraved in his flesh for the rest of his life.

During his free period, James decided to do some work in the library to take his mind off of it. He and Severus probably wouldn't be having dinner together, so he'd need to do his homework on his own. When he walked in, he wanted nothing more than to sit at the table where he and Severus had sat that first day, but he refrained. He didn't want Sev to feel uncomfortable in his favorite spot. James instead moved to an alcove a couple of stacks away where no one would find him and took out his Arithmancy homework.

He was actually doing an alright job of it, but then he heard *his* voice, and James dropped his quill.

"...happened, and I need to talk to someone about it," Severus said. There was a scraping noise as a chair was pulled back. A book bag dropped to the ground.

"Sure, Sev, what's up?" Lily. Another chair. A book bag, lighter this time.

James knew he should leave, but he suddenly felt glued to his seat. He tried to remember how to breathe. Whatever Severus had to say couldn't be good, but it might make the rejection feel more real if he knew what Sev was thinking. James strained to hear them over the beating of his own heart. Their voices were too soft to make out. He considered turning into his Animagus form to hear better, but then Lily's voice lifted to an audible level.

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," she said. "It's a pretty common one."

"You don't understand," Severus insisted. "It *changed*. And the only people I've spent any time with over the past few weeks are you and *him*. So unless your--"

"No," Lily said, sympathy in her voice. "Lioness."

Severus swore.

James couldn't figure out what they were talking about. He assumed he was the "him" Sev mentioned, but he couldn't figure out what any of it meant. What did Lily being a Gryffindor have to do with anything? That wasn't exactly news.

Their voices quieted again for a few minutes, so the next thing James heard was Lily saying, "Maybe it isn't such a bad thing."

"How could it not be?"

"He's different since he started spending time with you. I know we used to hate him together, but you must have noticed he's not that guy anymore."

"He's still the same person, Lily."

"But he's trying to be better. For *you*. Surely you can see how much he cares about you?" Severus mumbled something, but apparently, James wasn't the only one who couldn't hear. "What was that?"

"He told me he loved me today."

Lily didn't speak for a moment. "And?"

"And I panicked and left," he snapped. "He must have found out somehow, and that's why he did it. To mess with me or something."

"Severus Snape, you idiot. He wasn't trying to mess with you. He was trying to ask you out."

"But--"

"No 'but's. It's obvious he's in love with you. Lupin and I have been sharing commiserative looks about the two of you all week. It's exhausting watching him flirt with you as you pretend not to notice."

"I wasn't *pretending*. I just thought he was... *like that*. In case you've forgotten, I don't exactly have a lot of friends."

"Okay, point taken. But Sev, I know for a fact that he's serious about you." She coughed awkwardly. "When James came to convince me to give you a second chance, I sort of...accidentally admitted that I had begun to fancy him."

"You *what*?"

"Don't you dare say a thing about it, Sev," Lily warned.

"I couldn't if I wanted to. I'm in shock."

"Oh, sod off. My *point* is I finally showed interest after years of him chasing after me, but spending a few days with you made him so smitten he didn't give a rat's arse. I mean, he was smug about it, of course, but the only thing he cared about was making sure I'd visit you in the Hospital Wing."

There was silence for several seconds, and James imagined Severus was processing her words. "I

didn't want this," he said finally. The ache in his voice was tangible. "He wasn't supposed to take anything else from me. I was supposed to have nothing to lose." James was only following pieces of the conversation, but he felt horrible about whatever he'd done to make Severus so upset.

"Sometimes good things require a bit of risk," Lily said. "Giving you a second chance was a risk for me, and it's the best decision I ever made."

"I don't want him to have any more power over me."

Lily sighed. "There are more important things than power, Sev. And love is the most powerful magic there is." James' breath caught in his throat. Did that mean Severus...? No, it couldn't. James was just projecting. But what *did* it mean then? "Sometimes it hurts," Lily continued, "or doesn't play out the way we wanted, but it's damn worth it, and you'll regret it forever if you let it get away."

James gathered his things as quietly as he could and slipped into the stacks. He felt guilty for eavesdropping but he couldn't stem the hope that maybe his feelings weren't as unrequited as he'd thought. Above all, he felt afraid that now that he'd gotten his hopes up, rejection would break him beyond repair.

Chapter 14

James went to the Great Hall for dinner for the first time in ages. He wanted to let Severus make the next move, whatever it was. A few seconds after he sat down, however, Lily came up to him.

“Evans,” James greeted.

“Potter.” She sat beside him so they could speak without being overheard. It was easy to do so after that because the table suddenly burst into loud whispers. Apparently, the rest of Gryffindor thought Lily had finally agreed to go out with him. “Why aren’t you eating with Severus?” she hissed.

James blinked, fork pausing halfway to his mouth. “Um, I told him I was in love with him and he ran away from me. I thought after that maybe I should give him some space.”

Lily whipped him over the head with a napkin. “Who are you and what have you done with James Potter?”

“Funny, people have been asking me that a lot lately, but I never thought you’d miss the old me.”

“Not the annoying, bullying prat,” Lily said with an eye roll. “The James Potter who doesn’t give up so easily. Get your sorry arse down there before Severus loses his nerve.”

James felt his heart race at her words. “You mean he--”

“Don’t you dare hurt him, James,” Lily said, and the fire in her eyes told him he wouldn’t live to see tomorrow if he did. Her lips softened into a smile. “Good luck.”

James wondered if his nerves were as obvious as he thought they were as he smiled back. When Remus nodded to him over the table, James felt himself relax a bit.

He pulled out the Marauder’s Map as he walked and veered toward the dungeons when he spotted Sev’s name there. He broke into a run as soon as he was alone, and when he got to the classroom, he burst through the door without a second thought.

Severus spun around, looking surprised to see him, and perhaps a bit green.

“Hi,” James said breathlessly. “Sorry I’m late. I was going to give you your space, but Lily told me to come find you, so I hope that’s okay--” James broke off when Severus stepped closer.

The Slytherin was worrying at a hole in his robes as he stared up at James. There was something in his eyes, but James couldn’t tell quite what it was. He stepped closer again--slowly, as if afraid one wrong move might shatter them both.

“This better not be a bloody prank, Potter.”

And then he kissed him.

It was brief and chaste, but it felt like the world was finally turning at the right speed. When they separated, James let out a contented sigh. "Oh."

Sev's eyes were wide like he was afraid he'd made a horrible mistake. James didn't know if it was because Severus didn't mean to have kissed him or because he was worried James hadn't wanted him to, so he asked, "Can I kiss you again? You can use the safe word if you're uncomfortable."

After a moment of consideration, Severus nodded. James felt his heart skip a beat, and he pulled Severus into a deeper kiss than the one before. It was sloppy and wet and their noses kept bumping but James felt like his skin was on fire. Or maybe that was the wrong analogy, because his skin *had* been on fire before, after an especially poorly thought-out prank, and this was a million times better than that. Because Severus was *kissing* him, and that meant somehow he wanted James too.

"Sorry," Severus said, breaking away as their teeth clacked against each other. "I've never--"

"You're doing wonderfully," James told him, smiling and pressing another kiss to his lips. "You're perfect." A kiss. "Breathtaking." Another. "Gorgeous. If I sculpted a statue of this moment to honor the goddess of love, she would retire and ask you to take her place."

"Potter?"

"Yes, my prince?"

"Shut up." Severus drew him in again, and his lips were curious and shy as they melded with James'. James tugged gently at Severus' robes until they were pressed against each other, and then he wrapped his arms around Sev's back to pull them even closer. He slotted their legs together, wanting there to be as little space between them as possible. His movements were slow and reverent. He'd wanted to touch Severus--to kiss him and caress him and hold him--for so long. Now that it was happening, James wanted to remember every single detail. The smell of apple conditioner mixing with something earthy that probably came from Sev's Potions kit. The small sounds Sev made each time their lips separated. The way Severus pulsed with energy like he wanted to take control but didn't know how. The way James wanted to let him.

Sev's hands were still limp at his sides as if he didn't know what to do with them. Hesitantly, he lifted them until they tangled in James' hair. James made a sound of approval before letting his own hands drift to Severus' hips. He traced circles with his thumbs as they deepened their kiss. He didn't know he could want Severus any more than he already did, but tendrils of desire flared up in his stomach, higher with each passing second. If he had any doubts about his attraction to Severus, they would have disintegrated in those flames.

Sev broke away to make a startled sound when he felt James' interest against his thigh. James laughed, feeling shy and a bit dizzy with happiness and lust. "Still worried this is a prank?" James teased, his voice rougher than he intended.

Severus growled and backed him into the wall, pinning his wrists and capturing his lips in a biting kiss. James groaned. Spurred on by the sound, Severus slotted their thighs together once more and probed at James' lips with his tongue. James opened to the welcome intrusion and moaned when their tongues touched. What Sev lacked in experience, he made up in intensity, and Holy fucking Merlin, James was hooked. He'd known he was bent for weeks, but fuck, he hadn't properly imagined how good it would feel to have Sev's flat chest pressed against his, or his bruising lips crashing against his, or that spectacular hardness pressed against his thigh.

I don't want him to have any more power over me, Severus had told Lily. James would have laughed at the thought had his mouth not been otherwise occupied. James had wealth and popularity, certainly, but he was so head over heels for Severus, he would give it all up for even a moment of this. If that wasn't power, James didn't know what was.

James broke the kiss reluctantly, a hint of embarrassment to his smile. "I, uh, don't think I'm going to make it much longer," he said. Or at least, he was pretty sure that's what he said. But then Severus smirked at him, breathless and pink instead of his usual sallow yellow, and James couldn't concentrate on anything except how bloody gorgeous Sev was. "Was that..." James cleared his throat, trying to remember how to make words. "Was that okay?"

Severus shrugged coyly. "It was alright."

"Oh, sod off," James retorted, but there was still a smile on his face. Severus smiled back. He had smiled at Lily before in James' presence, but James was pretty sure this was the first real smile Severus had ever given him. For several seconds, he stopped breathing entirely. He pulled Severus into a tight hug, and Sev tucked his head under his chin with something like a purr. James loved the way the sound reverberated through his chest. He kissed the crown of Sev's head, inhaling the intoxicating apple scent and humming happily. "So, what changed?" James asked. "This morning, I could have sworn I'd scared you off for good."

Severus didn't lift his head. "I talked with Lily, and she told me I was an idiot. And I did some research."

"Research?"

"Legilimency," Sev said into his chest. "On some of the couples I passed. I needed to make sure you were telling the truth."

"What did you find?"

"You were right. You do...love...me," Severus said uncomfortably, like the concept was still hard to process. "But after using Legilimency on quite a few people, I can say you were wrong in thinking I should have recognized it from past experience. Lily's feelings for me are softer--more subtle and less complicated. And the couples I studied have something similar to what I felt in your mind, but it's not nearly as intense or obsessive as what you feel toward me." He let out a soft puff of laughter, and James was certain it was the most perfect sound he'd ever heard. "Should I be concerned?"

The remaining shreds of James' masculinity screamed in protest at Sev's words, but the rest of him felt victorious--like he'd won some sort of competition by loving Sev to such a ridiculous degree. "What can I say?" James said. "I don't do things by halves."

Sev snorted, nuzzling into James' chest. *Nuzzling*. James nearly died. Surely being this goddamn adorable was illegal.

"Just so you know," Sev said, "I upgraded you to 'friend' that day in the hospital."

"When I kissed you on the forehead while you pretended to be asleep?" James asked.

"No, when you said we should come up with a safe word."

"Ah," James teased. "It was the offer of sex that drew you in."

Severus pulled out of the hug to glare at him. "Would you let me finish?"

“Revenge is sweet.” James distractedly ran his fingers through Severus’ hair, tucking a stray strand behind his ear.

“Maybe I won’t tell you then,” Severus said haughtily, but before James could protest, he sighed and tried again. “You made it clear that you weren’t just doing this for your own gratification or to superficially ease your guilt. You wanted to make sure I was comfortable.” He played with James’ tie with his long fingers. “No one’s ever done that for me before.”

James kissed him again. “I’ll fight anyone who tries to hurt you,” he said firmly.

Severus looked away. “You can’t protect me from everything, James.”

James lifted his chin gently. “I will. I’ll tell everyone that if they mess with you, they’ll have me and the other Marauders to deal with, and they won’t dare lay a finger on you or taunt you or anything.”

Severus laughed darkly. “Avery and Mulciber aren’t afraid of a few Gryffindors. You’re underestimating the power of the Dark Arts.”

James shook his head. “No, I’m not. I know what they can do, and I know that we can fight them.”

“We?” Severus pulled away, looking disgusted. “If you’re trying to stop me from using the Dark Arts, then you can fuck off.”

“Sev--”

“No,” he snarled. “Don’t try to act all high and mighty about something you know nothing about. Do you know why I know so much about the Dark Arts? Why even in first year I knew more about them than most wizards learn in their entire lives? Because it was the only way to stop my father from beating me, or killing my mother when they fought. Jelly leg jinxes and pus squirting hexes might work alright against childish teasing, but if someone bigger and stronger than you is going to cut you, you have to be able to cut them back.”

James gave Severus his space but met his eyes, hoping they conveyed all the emotions going through his head. “I’m not asking you to give up the Dark Arts. I won’t pretend I like the idea of you using them. I hate how easily they corrupt otherwise good people, and to be honest, they scare the shit out of me. But I’m grateful you have a way to protect yourself.”

“Then what are you saying?” Severus snapped.

“I don’t want you to become a Death Eater!” James yelled. Severus flinched and closed off at the words, but James couldn’t bring himself to take them back.

“Whether I do or don’t has nothing to do with you, Potter,” he said stiffly.

James sunk into a chair in defeat. “But I wish it did. I wish you could understand how much I care about you--how determined I am to make sure you have everything you could ever want in life. If you could see that, you wouldn’t need to join the Death Eaters--not for protection or connections or status. You wouldn’t need them.”

Severus turned away so James could no longer see his face. “I can’t rely on the promises of a sixteen-year-old boy with a crush. I won’t make the same mistake my mother did.” His voice shook but there was a powerful resolve to it. “What they can offer me--”

“Means nothing if you have to kill innocent people like Lily and her family to get it,” James

interrupted.

"I would never hurt Lily," Severus hissed.

"You say that now, but how can you know for sure? If everything you have--if all your hopes and dreams--rest in the hands of a madman, how can you possibly know what you'll do to keep him happy?"

"So I should place my life in your hands instead?"

"I'm not asking you to kill people!" James exclaimed. "I'm not asking anything of you except that you *don't* kill people. Even if you don't want to be with me, or speak to me, or have anything to do with me, I'll protect you and vouch for you and anything else you need. You Know Who wants to use you as a weapon, and when you've outlived your usefulness, he'll kill you too. In case you've forgotten, you're not a pureblood, which makes you the kind of person he and his followers like to *murder*. You'd rather place your life in his hands?"

"I don't want to hurt innocent people," Severus said desperately.

"Then don't. Choose the light. Choose Lily. Choose me." James walked toward Severus, placing a hand on his shoulder and turning him to face him.

"It's not that simple." Severus was shaking now, and James hated himself for causing the boy pain, but he couldn't let it go.

"Why? Are you being forced into it? Is Malfoy making you do this? Or Avery or Mulciber?"

Severus recoiled. "No one is forcing me into anything. Lucius is just looking out for me. Don't accuse him of hurting me--not after everything you've done. Lucius bought me books when you and your friends threw mine in the lake. He defended me when others picked on me or called me names."

"So you're swearing eternal servitude to a murderous lunatic to pay back your debts? Write Malfoy a fucking thank you card! I'll send him some galleons to make up the costs."

"It's not about the money, Potter, it's about trust. Lucius is the *only person* who's never abandoned me. It's easy for you to make proclamations about what you'll do for me, but it takes a lot more than words to make someone give their life to you. My mother tried to choose love, and look where it got her. Lucius will protect me. He would never do anything to hurt me, and that's more than I can say for you."

James felt his heart break at the loneliness and desperation in those words, wondering if reminders of how similar he was to Sev's father would ever stop cutting him. He almost stopped fighting right then and there in favor of wrapping Severus in a hug and never letting go. "Sev, your mother isn't the one to blame for what happened. Can't you see that the problem is with the people who disowned her for following her heart? The people who abandoned her because of stupid prejudices? Those are the kind of people you'll be surrounded by if you join You Know Who. There's no real loyalty there, only fear and what it makes people do."

"What's the alternative, James? It's not like the other side would want a Slytherin like me," Severus sneered.

"Dumbledore, you mean?" James thought of how the headmaster treated the students in his care and scoffed. "We don't have to fight for him. We can fight for us. For Lily. Everyone else aside, you should do it for *you*, Sev. You're brilliant. You can do so much good in the world with your

Potions talent, and even your skill with the Dark Arts. Don't make that face, I've seen how talented you are." Severus didn't respond, but he was no longer looking bitter and explosive, so James said softly, "You deserve to do something you love, not settle--and certainly not for an option like that. Just think about it, okay? I want a future with you. But I can't stand by and watch you become someone who causes pain and death and misery. No reward is worth becoming one of them."

Severus closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh. "I'll think about it."

"Thank you," James said in relief, giving in to the urge to hug Severus again. Sev hesitantly hugged him back, and they stood there like that for what felt like forever, listening to the sound of their breathing, shaking with emotion.

"I didn't bring any food," James said eventually, hoping to diffuse the tension. "Wanna go to the kitchens and grab a bite to eat?"

"Is food all you think about, Potter?" Severus asked, but he picked up his bag and moved toward the door.

James grinned shakily in relief and hurried after him. "I can't let you wither away to nothing, my prince."

The house-elves were ecstatic at their arrival. They doted over Severus, offering him more vitamin potions and telling him how much his skin and hair were improving. He looked overwhelmed by their praise, but James noticed he held his head a little higher.

"So," Severus started once they were digging into their food. "Is this...association...official?"

James lifted his brows teasingly. "I believe the word you're looking for is 'relationship'. Are you asking me to be your boyfriend, Severus?"

Severus blushed, looking like he was about to deny it, but instead, he said, "Yes."

James wanted to jump in the air and dance around the kitchens, but he was worried Sev might take it back if he did that. "I would love to," he said instead, wrapping an arm around Sev's waist and pulling them closer together. "How do you think we should announce it to the world? A banner in the Great Hall that reads, 'James Potter is head over heels for Severus Snape and somehow it's requited'? A spell that makes little hearts float through the air with 'S + J' in them? Or how about we install a portrait of us to hang in the Charms hallway so everyone who passes gets an eyeful of our paint-selves snogging?"

Severus stared at him with barely concealed horror. "I've made a grave mistake. Lily was right all along. James Potter cannot be trusted to behave sensibly in a relationship."

James snickered. Then an idea struck. He knew it shown in his eyes because the horror on Sev's face suddenly became more pronounced. "I have the perfect plan," James told him with glee.

When James entered the common room that evening, he collapsed on the couch beside Sirius and Peter with a lovestruck look on his face.

"You're in a right state, Prongs," Sirius commented. "Catch a glimpse at Evans in the showers?"

James shook his head slowly. "I told Severus Snape I'm in love with him," he said, still unable to comprehend how well the whole affair had gone. He had hoped, of course, but he had never really let himself believe the Slytherin would like him back.

"What?" Sirius asked. He looked like he was considering getting a refund on his ears.

"And then he asked me to be his boyfriend," James said with even more wonder.

Sirius started laughing. "That's hilarious, mate! What did he do when you told him it was a prank?"

James didn't respond, running through the first hesitant kiss in his mind. There had been a lot of kissing that evening since they found an empty classroom after finishing their meal and took advantage of their new relationship status, but it was that first one that James remembered with the most affection.

"Um, Padfoot? I don't think he's joking." Peter's voice brought James back to the current moment, and he prepared for the inevitable outrage of his best mate.

Sirius stared at him blankly for upwards of three minutes. Then he said, "You're telling me you just asked out Dark Arts connoisseur and Death Eater wannabe Severus Snape while I've been worrying over how to ask out Remus Lupin, the softest, sweetest, nerdiest werewolf in the entire world?"

James didn't know how to respond to that, but apparently, it was rhetorical because Sirius clapped a hand on his shoulder and said, "Congrats, mate. We'll talk later," before jumping up and running to their dormitory. "Oi, Moony!"

James turned to Peter, shocked into silence for the first time in his life.

"He took that better than expected," Peter said hesitantly.

James stared blankly.

Peter gave him an awkward smile. "Um, good job, I guess?"

James gave a weak nod, still bewildered.

"HE SAID YES!" Padfoot yelled from upstairs. There was a distant crashing sound and a wolfish yelp.

Finally, James recovered from his shock, and a laugh bubbled out of him. His friends were still talking to him, he had the most adorable boyfriend ever, and the Christmas prank was going to be epic. He felt confident that, even with the war going on, things might actually be okay.

Chapter 15

“Well, this is a few more students than I was expecting for detention tonight,” Slughorn said, looking between the faces before him with perplexion.

James tried to ignore the throbbing in his eye enough to listen for their task. He was supposed to be holding ice to it until he could visit the Hospital Wing, but that meant taking off his glasses, and he hated not being able to see. So, suffering it was.

He didn't look to his right, but he could practically feel Padfoot fuming next to him. Sirius was breathing loudly through his mouth since his nose was broken and still bleeding, and the sound was reminiscent of those bulls Muggles trained for fighting. James tried to refrain from looking to his left as well, but he failed continuously. In the seat furthest away, Avery scowled from beneath the multitude of bandages wrapped around his head. Mulciber was in the next seat with a sneer on his lips and patches on both eyes. Severus was next, and it took everything in James not to rush to him and check for injuries. He had a bruise on his cheek and a scratch on his chin, but he looked otherwise okay. Lily was the only one who seemed unharmed, and she glared at Slughorn from her seat between James and Severus with righteous fire in her eyes.

“Two of you will organize the supply closet, and the rest will clean the classroom by hand,” Slughorn continued. “For the supply closet, perhaps...Avery and Snape?” Lily growled, and Slughorn's eyes widened. “Avery and Mulciber, then,” he amended. “Now, I'm going to pop out for a bit, but if there is any fighting in my absence, you'll be in detention for the rest of the week--a task I'll gladly assign to Filch.” The threat of those words wasn't lost on anyone. Slughorn led Avery and Mulciber to the supply closet and, after giving both parties their instructions, waddled out of the room.

The minute the four of them were alone, James ran to Sev's side. “Are you alright? What did they do to you?” He brushed his fingertips across Sev's cheek, causing the Slytherin to wince. James wasn't sure if the reaction was prompted by the pain or the public touching. “This bruise looks terrible.”

Severus rolled his eyes, but he didn't seem to mind James' doting. In fact, he looked rather pleased, although he was doing his best to hide it. “You're one to talk. What happened to your eye?”

James jerked his thumb in Padfoot's direction. “Sirius here didn't warn me before punching me in the face, so I didn't have a chance to take my glasses off. Luckily, the glass shards missed my eye, but the part around it still looks like a pixie carcass.”

“Hey, don't blame this on me,” Sirius interjected, his usually aristocratic voice made nasally by his injury. “It's not my fault you want a slimy snake to join the Marauders. What was I supposed to do? *Not* punch you?”

"Don't call him that," James growled. "And I didn't say Severus should become a Marauder, just that he should be part of our pra--" James cut himself off with a glance at Lily. "--project." She narrowed her eyes.

"You might as well have handed him a fucking membership pin," Sirius snapped. "It's one thing for you to date him--which I still don't understand, by the way--but it's another thing to make the rest of us treat him like he's one of us."

Severus sneered. "Like I'd want to be part of your ridiculous club. I don't even want to do the 'project' in the first place."

"Guys, I know you're not talking about schoolwork," Lily said. "You can give up your pitiful attempt at secrecy."

Sirius looked affronted. "Nonsense. You're a *prefect*."

"So is Remus," Lily shot back, "and I have no doubt he's involved in whatever it is you're planning."

James turned his attention back to Severus, who did seem to be mostly unharmed, if a bit exhausted. James brushed Sev's hair behind his ears and cupped his face. "You're okay?" Severus looked uncomfortable under his gaze, but James couldn't make himself step back until he received an affirmative.

"I'm fine, James," Sev said. "If you express any more concern, you're at risk of becoming Madam Pomfrey."

James tried and failed to smile at the joke. Sev's injuries, however minimal, felt like another punch in the face, "I told you I wouldn't let anyone hurt you."

"And I told you that wasn't possible," Sev said tiredly. "It's not my fault you don't give a rat's arse about mortal concerns like impossibility."

James did smile then, pressing a quick kiss to Sev's lips. "You love that about me."

"You have an inflated perception of yourself," Severus said, but he was smiling softly, so the words didn't have the effect he intended. James only managed to break his gaze away when the sound of Sirius banging his head on the desk became painful.

"Alright there, Black?" Lily asked with a grin.

"I thought once I saw them together, the strange things James told me would make sense," Sirius moaned. "I was wrong. Nothing about this makes sense, but now I can picture it in vivid detail."

James glared at his friend. "Oi! I thought you were going to try to be supportive."

Sev made a strangled noise. "He punched you in the face."

"Yes, but that was because of a very specific issue," James explained, "not because you and I are together. He claimed he was okay with that part."

"I am," Sirius protested, looking very much like he was not okay with it. "It'll just...take some getting used to. And by some, I mean a lot."

Lily laughed. "Sounds like you two should snog in front of him more often."

Sirius paled. “Nope. Nope nope nope.”

James grinned, pleased that the tension between them had disappeared. He and Sirius fought sometimes, but it never lasted long. Even though they never really hated each other, it was always a relief to be back on good terms. “So we’ve established why Sirius and I look like roadkill. What happened to you two?”

“Avery and Mulciber were bullying a Muggleborn from Hufflepuff, and when they asked Sev to join in, he refused.” Lily looked at Severus admiringly. “They told him he could help them or join the Hufflepuff, and he chose the latter. That’s when he got the bruise and cut. I stepped in to help, and we sort of, well, mutilated Avery and Mulciber. That’s why we’re stuck here.” She glared at the door. “No one cared that we were acting defensively.”

James looked at Severus with happy surprise and kissed him again. Severus was shy in kissing back, as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do with this kind of praise. James was pretty sure the only reason Sev was allowing it in the first place was that he knew it would piss off Sirius. At the moment, James didn’t mind--the throbbing area around his eye certainly wasn’t complaining.

“Does that mean you’ve officially forgiven him?” James asked Lily when they broke away.

Her lips curved upwards and she looked like she was fighting the urge to roll her eyes at James. “Yes, I suppose it does.”

Sev ducked under his hair. “You know I didn’t do it for you.”

James almost wondered if Lily was performing Legilimency on Sev with how closely she studied him. “I know. That’s why I can forgive you. You did it because it was the right thing to do.” The pride in her voice made the room feel brighter, but it made the air heavier too because it drew attention to the significance of Sev’s choice. It wasn’t just about choosing morality over House loyalty. The war lived in the shadows of every decision they made, large or small.

Severus cleared his throat. “We should start cleaning so we don’t get another detention.”

As they stood to do just that, Sirius walked over to them, the tissue hanging out of his nose like a very unflattering mustache. He looked Severus up and down carefully. “I won’t pretend to understand what James sees in you, but I’ll admit it was pretty alright of you to stand up for that Hufflepuff.”

Severus lifted his brows. “Well, now that I have Black’s approval...”

Sirius snorted—and then regretted it if his wince was any indication—and held out his hand. “Truce?” Sev eyed the appendage with distaste. “Oh, come on,” Sirius groaned. “You’re not going to make me do the whole earning your forgiveness thing, are you? If James is anything to go by, that ends in snogging, and I think we both want to avoid that.”

Severus made a face and shook the hand quickly.

James laughed, cuffing Sirius on the shoulder. “Thanks, mate.” He grinned mischievously. “Does this mean you’re cool with my ‘project’ idea?”

Sirius hesitated before rolling his eyes. “Yeah, okay. But just this once. And only because the looks on everyone’s faces will be hilarious.”

“Hooray,” Severus deadpanned.

James slung his arms around them both in an attempt at a group hug, but both Padfoot and Severus refused to touch each other, so it was more of an affectionate line.

Lily looked on with apprehension. "I'm not sure if I should be more or less concerned that you're on board with whatever they're planning, Sev. Do I even want to know?"

"Know what?" Severus asked with his most innocent expression.

Sirius grinned and pulled Severus into a real hug, much to Sev's dismay. "Maybe you're not so bad after all."

"If only I could say the same," Sev muttered.

James, Severus, and the other Marauders stood in the classroom nearest to the Great Hall with three minutes until the start of the feast, listening attentively as Moony went through his checklist to make sure everything was in place for the prank.

"Peter, you asked the house-elves to remove all the knives in case anyone decides to try and cut themselves free?"

"Yep," the small boy chirped. "They didn't even ask why."

Sirius grinned. "I think they're fans of ours."

"Or they just know by now it's better to work with us than against us," Remus replied with a smirk.

Padfoot salivated at the sight. Even James had to admit that Remus had a special sort of energy about him right before a prank, although he certainly wouldn't classify it as sexy. 'Awe-inspiring', maybe, or perhaps 'bloody terrifying'.

"If we didn't have a prank to pull," Sirius said, "I'd say to hell with the feast and have my way with you right here."

"Please don't," Peter squeaked.

Severus grimaced. "I second that request."

Remus' smirk grew but he merely returned to his list. "Padfoot, you checked to make sure the timers were set for precisely ten minutes into the feast?"

"As requested, my dearest Moony."

"And Prongs, you arranged the countercurse?"

"All ready to go," James said. He cast a winning smile at Severus. "Charming my favorite Slytherin is one of my strong suits, after all." Severus rolled his eyes at him.

"All right. And Snape, you know your cue?"

"Yes," he said with abundant distaste. "I'd like to state one more time that I think this is ridiculous."

Sirius looked like he wanted to give him a pat on the back and then thought better of it. He settled

for a smile. “No backing out now. Surely you knew what you were getting into when you started dating a Marauder.”

The sight of them together made James’ heart flutter. He was glad that his boyfriend and his best mate were getting along so well. It felt almost unreal. When James brought it up the day before, Padfoot pointed out that while James had always hated Snape in particular, Sirius just didn’t like Slytherins in general--which wasn’t surprising considering his family. He followed up by saying he could make an exception just this once since it clearly meant a lot to James. Sirius didn’t mention it, but James wondered if part of the reason for his support was that he hoped if Severus could switch to the light side, it might mean Regulus had a chance to do so as well.

Sev and the Marauders had spent the last two nights casting spells together in the Great Hall to prepare for the prank, and Padfoot and Severus didn’t fight at all, even if they didn’t look happy about it at first. Remus and Severus clicked immediately, possibly bonding over how obnoxious their boyfriends were or perhaps their obsession with schoolwork. Peter seemed scared of Severus, which was warranted considering the number of curses Sev knew, but they quietly avoided each other, and that arrangement seemed to work out alright for everyone. Severus was still wary of the other Marauders, but whenever he met James’ eye, he looked comfortable. James figured that was good enough for now.

“I think that’s everything then,” Remus said, tucking the checklist into his robes.

James caught Sirius’ eye and grinned.

The moment the magic kicked into action was marked by a loud shriek from the Hufflepuff table and a squawk from Slytherin. Then there was chaos. Entire rows of people were stuck shoulder to shoulder because they’d been sitting so close together. A pair of Ravenclaws who had been playing footsie under the table were now arguing loudly over who would be forced to climb under the table to meet the other. A seventh year Gryffindor James had seen only in passing slapped the boy next to her when he made an inappropriate comment, and the hand got stuck to his face. Across the Great Hall, two Slytherin first years had somehow ended up with their toes attached to the mitts of a broad-shouldered seventh year who was trying fruitlessly to shake them free. Several students at the Hufflepuff table were attempting to separate their conjoined friends, but they only succeeded in tangling themselves in an enormous mass of limbs. As one Ravenclaw looked through her textbooks to find a countercurse, someone bumped into her, and she accidentally got swept up in what looked vaguely like a Muggle conga line.

“Moony,” Sirius said in awe. “This is so beautiful I could kiss you.”

“That would rather ruin the finale, don’t you think?” Remus said with a smile.

“A hug then,” Sirius amended, opening his arms wide.

Remus scooted away from him in warning. “Padfoot, don’t you dare--” Sirius tackled Moony to the ground in an impressive embrace amidst Remus’ yelps. “You mangy mutt! I swear to Merlin, I will--” His voice turned into an incoherent mess of growls as the two of them struggled and failed to stand up.

James glanced at Wormtail. “I suppose we should join the chaos now, or it will be obvious who’s responsible.”

Peter saluted him and slipped away to attach himself to a pretty Hufflepuff girl.

"It's already obvious who's responsible, Potter," Lily said from where she was sandwiched between Mary and Alice, the latter of whom was attached to Frank by the ankle. "Just tell us how to make it stop."

"If I knew, don't you think I would have done it already?" James asked innocently.

"No!" they chorused. And with that, they dragged him backwards into their clump by his arms. He let them, knowing this was the perfect angle for the finale--and also for watching the madness continue to unfold.

Avery and Mulciber were connected by the shoulder blades like they had backed into each other by accident, and now they were spinning in circles in an effort to speak face to face. Mulciber's injuries hadn't healed nearly as well as everyone else's, so he was still wearing patches on both eyes, which didn't help matters much. A handful of Ravenclaws were taking advantage of the spell by crafting a human art piece with their bodies, directing each other on where to go and laughing when it went awry. Apparently, they trusted the other members of their House to figure out the counter curse soon enough. Some of the younger Gryffindors were playing a rather intense game of red rover, similarly trusting the Marauders to free them if their situation became too dire. James noted a few of the most enthusiastic ones for future reference. They only had a year and a half left to find their successors, after all.

The professors were doing their best to stem the hysteria, but even they weren't trying to stop the curse after the first few tries backfired so horribly. James grinned. It was Moony's idea to turn anyone who cast a spell into a sort of magnet, drawing in the five closest people and sticking them to the caster. McGonagall was giving him the most reproachful look he'd seen in all his years at Hogwarts, but he couldn't quite take her seriously since she was glued to Pomfrey, Sprout, Slughorn, Hooch, and an oddly amused Dumbledore.

"James Potter! Sirius Black!" McGonagall screeched. "End this nonsense this instant or you'll be in detention every week for the rest of the year!"

James thought it would be a miracle if they managed a lighter sentence than that. He didn't say that though. He was a Marauder through and through. By now everyone knew it was their fault when things like this happened, but that didn't mean he'd *admit* it.

"I wish I knew how, Professor," he yelled back. He glanced around to make sure everyone was appropriately frazzled and tangled in the mess of bodies before catching the other Marauders' eyes. Sirius and Remus were wrapped around each other and also somehow intertwined with Dorcas and Marlene. Dorcas had her hand on Marlene's boob, but neither looked too upset about the whole affair. Peter had been sucked into the Great Hufflepuff Blob and the Hufflepuff girl was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the Blob had become a sentient beast and swallowed her whole. One by one the Marauders nodded, giving him the go-ahead.

"I have an idea, everyone!" James yelled. "A spontaneous idea that did *not* arise from designing this prank, because, as I have stated, I am innocent." He ignored the eye rolls he received in response and continued. "Where is Severus Snape?"

Everyone looked around, desperate to be free but also curious where James was going with this.

"James," Lily said warningly, "if this is another prank to bully Severus, I will actually kill you."

He shushed her. The doors to the Great Hall flew open and Severus walked in. He looked so small as he came forward, quiet confidence in his movements. Everyone was hushed and still (or as still as they could be when tied in uncomfortable knots anyway) as they waited to see what would

happen.

As Severus made his way toward James, he was careful to avoid getting stuck to anyone, ducking under outstretched limbs and stepping lightly over the figures lying across the floor.

“Our wands merely strengthen the pull of the curse, so we can’t cast a counter,” James said with fervor. And sure, the dramatics were a bit much even by James’ standards, but with all the obituaries in the papers every morning, James figured they could use some comedic relief before the holidays. “Any attempt to help our friends only ensnares us further. That leaves us with only one option.” He waited until Severus was only a few paces away before announcing, “True love’s kiss!”

Severus was trying to keep a blank face but James could see the laughter in his eyes as he crossed the last few feet and pressed his lips to James’. For a terrifying beat, James was certain it hadn’t worked and that they would all be stuck indefinitely. But then the magic washed over them, and everyone let out a collective sigh of relief.

James slipped his arms out of Frank and Mary’s and wrapped them around Severus, kissing him again.

“Not bad for your first prank as an honorary Marauder,” he murmured again Sev’s lips.

Severus narrowed his eyes. “I did not consent to that horrid title, and I certainly did not agree to future mischief. I believe ‘only’ is the term you’re looking for.”

James laughed. “I love you.” Before Severus could respond, he added, “And yes, ‘love’ is the term I was looking for.”

Severus blushed that beautiful shade that made James fall in love with him again and again. “I love you too, you prat.”

James’ heart leaped in his chest. The counter-curse had been set to go off the second their lips touched--since it was much harder than James anticipated to incorporate love into spellwork--so that wasn’t an indication of anything. But this...He was so happy to hear those words that it took him several seconds to realize Lily was yelling at him.

“...cheesiest, stupidest, most dangerous and ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen.” She looked at Severus and softened. “But you two are really cute together. I’m happy for you.”

Sirius appeared then and wrapped James in a bear hug so tight James was thankful they weren’t stuck that way. He cast Moony a sympathetic glance and the werewolf nodded in understanding before smiling and hugging him as well. Peter ducked into their circle and did a victory dance, high on the success of the prank, while the other Marauders wolf-whistled and cheered him on. Severus looked embarrassed on Wormtail’s behalf, but James caught him smiling when he thought no one was watching.

There were fewer injuries than usually resulted from a Marauder prank, so it didn’t take long for the professors to shift from caregiving to blame-seeking. Sirius noticed McGonagall first and elbowed Peter. Peter ceased dancing in favor of staring at his freed limbs with exaggerated relief while Sirius pretended to sob into Moony’s shoulder. “I thought we were going to be stuck like that forever. Thank Merlin James had a moment of inspiration and remembered the power of true love!”

McGonagall’s lip twitched but her glare was fatal. “While this is all very touching, I’m afraid you

will have to finish your heartfelt reunion in my office.”

James gaped, giving his best expression of indignation. “But Professor McGonagall, surely you wouldn’t punish heroism such as you’ve witnessed here today.”

She lifted a brow. “Of course not, Mr. Potter.” She turned to Severus. “Mr. Snape, I commend you for your,” she paused, amusement glinting in her eyes, “moving performance. Fifty points to Slytherin.” She spun on the Marauders who were protesting loudly. “The rest of you will be lucky if you have a free evening for the rest of your career here with all the detentions you’ll be serving.” She silenced them with a look. “My office. Ten minutes.”

That evening, James found Severus in the same abandoned classroom where they’d met the first night. It was freezing in the dungeons this close to Christmas, but it felt right to be there.

In the chaos of the feast, there had been an understandable lack of eating, so Severus had offered to bring food. They had eaten quickly while discussing the Marauders’ punishment, which was to serve detention three days a week for the remainder of their sixth year. All in all, that was better than they were expecting and far less than they probably deserved, but McGonagall had always had a soft spot for them.

Now, Severus was curled into James’ side while James wrapped a blanket around them both.

“I’ve been thinking about...what I told you I’d think about,” Severus said quietly.

James tried not to sound too hopeful. “Oh?”

“I was supposed to meet Lucius last night,” Sev admitted, “while we were setting up the prank.” He didn’t say it, but James could hear the unspoken addition in his pause, *But I chose you*. “I’m not going to give up the Dark Arts,” Sev continued, “and I can’t promise to stay away from the Slytherins in my year.” He took a deep breath. “But I’m not going to join the Death Eaters. I’ve spent my entire life afraid of becoming my mother. But after seeing Lucius’ thoughts...I realized it would be far worse to become my father.”

James looked at him, unsure how to convey what he was feeling with words. Apparently, he didn’t need to because the Slytherin ducked his head, overwhelmed by the attention. James lifted his chin and kissed him deeply, pouring all of his relief, affection, and gratitude into the touch.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Severus warned, as if James had decided this solved all of their problems.

“Nothing wonderful ever is,” James said, planting soft kisses along Severus’ jaw.

Severus scoffed at the platitude, but he was too distracted by James’ actions to properly reprimand the Gryffindor. “The Dark Lord already has his eye on me, and he doesn’t give up easily,” he added. “Not to mention, the other Slytherins will curse me if they find out I’m abandoning their cause.”

“And you’ll curse them right back. I’ve never met someone as talented at inventing ways to maim someone as you.”

“If I had known that was how to impress you, Potter,” Severus said dryly, “we’d have ended up here a lot quicker.”

James laughed against Severus' neck. "You know what I mean." James pulled back to look in Sev's eyes. "We'll get through this. And then we'll win the war and live happily ever after."

"That sounds too good to be true," Severus whispered.

"Then it's the perfect thing to fight for."

Severus groaned. "Your optimism is sickening." He seemed appeased for the moment, however, and cuddled back into James' side. After several minutes of comfortable silence, Severus shifted, and James waited for him to speak his mind. "You never asked me if I forgave you," Sev said finally.

James nuzzled his nose against Sev's hair, surprising himself with his answer. "I don't want to know." Dumbledore was right about one thing at least--Sev's forgiveness wasn't an end goal, and it wasn't going to erase the past. It certainly wasn't going to make James the person he wanted to be. James had to do that on his own. He pressed a kiss to Sev's forehead. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life doing nice things for you, regardless of whether or not you forgive me."

"The rest of your life?" Severus asked in surprise.

James lifted his brows. "You have a terrible habit of doubting my time commitment." Severus huffed in response. "But I did have something I wanted to know."

"Hmm?" Sev said sleepily.

"So, full disclosure, I overheard you and Lily talking in the library the other day."

Severus tensed against him. "You were eavesdropping?"

James made a face. "No, I was--yes, okay, maybe a bit. But you had just crushed my heart into little tiny pieces, and I thought you were only going to tell her about it and have a good laugh or something." Severus snorted. "But I couldn't hear all of it, so I didn't understand what you were talking about."

"Only you would ask clarification on something you overheard while eavesdropping, James."

James laughed, pleased that Severus wasn't angry with him. "Does that mean you're going to tell me?"

Severus pulled out his wand and whispered something under his breath. A silvery light exploded from the tip, and suddenly a stunning doe Patronus was dancing around the classroom.

James' breath grew short. "Sev--"

"It used to be a raven," Severus interrupted. "Until a couple of weeks ago. I didn't know what it meant. But then..."

James turned his gaze away from the doe and toward Severus, taking a mental snapshot of the expression on Sev's face. "But then I told you about my Animagus form," James finished. He drew his own wand and cast the spell. They watched as a stag joined the doe and the two pranced around the room in a mesmerizing dance. "They're beautiful together."

Severus ended the spell and tucked himself into James' side once more. "It didn't feel beautiful when I first realized."

James let his own Patronus disappear and wrapped himself tighter around Severus. "You thought I was mocking you when I told you how I felt about you." Severus nodded. "Ridiculous," James murmured. "How could anyone not love you when they know you like I do?"

"I can't believe I put up with such romantic nonsense." Despite his words, Sev's voice was thick with emotion.

James reveled in it for several seconds before teasing, "Don't pretend it's not your favorite thing about me." When Sev didn't respond, James asked, "Top ten?" He received only a snort in response.

They sat like that until it was too cold even under their heat-charmed blanket. As Severus untucked himself from James' arms and stood, James leaned back and stared at him with adoration.

"Will you come home with me for Christmas?"

"Do I have to buy you a present?" Severus asked.

"Hmmm...no. You can be my present."

"You're ridiculous."

"And you're adorable."

Severus huffed. "Alright, I'll go home with you for Christmas. But I'm not wearing a bow or climbing into a large box--not even to scare your parents in 'the best prank ever'."

James did his best to look properly admonished, which wasn't hard since he *had* been considering the idea, and instead tugged Severus back down for one last kiss.

As they parted ways to go to their separate dorms, James couldn't help but wonder where he would be if he hadn't decided to find Severus in the library that day. Would he still be chasing after Lily? Still bullying and treating Severus like rubbish? Perhaps he would have died without ever making amends. Whatever the case, James knew he had a long way to go before he could forgive himself for the person he was before, but he felt pretty certain he was on the right track. It had led him to Severus, after all.

When Snape brushes off James Potter's attempt to make amends, James makes a game out of winning the Slytherin's forgiveness. Instead of giving him some peace of mind, however, the game causes his feelings toward his once rival to spiral out of control in a direction he never anticipated.